This is “Legislatures: The Inside Storey” and I’m your host Tim Storey, CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. On this episode, we talk with Charlie Cook. Charlie founded The Cook Political Report in 1984. The Report is an independent nonpartisan newsletter analyzing American politics and it’s an absolute must read for anyone who is serious about tracking what’s truly happening in the U.S. government and elections. He retired as the publisher and editor role in 2021 handing that off to his outstanding colleague Amy Walter. He remains a regular contributor of what is now called The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter. He is busier than ever keeping a keen eye on the elections and traveling the Nation to share his insights with various groups. Thanks for joining me for this conversation with Charlie Cook.

There used to be an ad campaign that probably not everyone recalls about an investment firm called EF Hutton. In this ad campaign, it was really pretty genius. The voiceover would say when EF Hutton talks, everybody listens. Now I suspect, Charlie Cook, that this has been applied to you because for decades when Charlie Cook talks, everybody listens in Washington. And I know that you get all kinds of accolades, but I just want to say I think that’s absolutely true. You are the platinum standard or titanium standard – whatever is above platinum of people who have truly spent time and think about how Washington works and what’s going on in elections. So, Charlie Cook, welcome to the podcast.
CC: Thanks Tim.

TS: We are going to talk about the election and you’re going to with all the sort of standard caveats that we only know what we know now now and there’s still what five, just a little less than five weeks to go until the midterm elections. And you know, of course, it can’t go fast enough for most folks either because they’re sick of seeing ads in some competitive place or they are the candidates who just like want to get their lives back or at least some version of their life back or they are the people who do the analysis like yourself. You grew up in Louisiana. Is that right?

CC: Yes, Shreveport in the upper northwest corner of Louisiana. Culturally it was more similar to Arkansas and Texas than it was Louisiana because we were so, you know, 300 odd miles away from New Orleans and not that less to Baton Rouge. So, it was not in the Louisiana south of I-10 that most people think of Louisiana.

TS: So, let me just guess. You were in what probably I don’t know fifth grade, or fourth grade and you said you know someday I want to grow up and move to Washington and become the preeminent person to analyze American politics. Was that how you wound up in D.C.?

CC: I was a high school debater and used to use the library at a law firm, a friend of my father’s, and got recruited to help out in my senior high school to help do some research work for a guy from my-- a former state rep, state senator who had just loss the governor’s race in Louisiana, Bennett Johnston, and he was running for the U.S. Senate. And so, I got recruited to help out doing research. I had gone to Georgetown High School debate camp two summers in a row and that is sort of when I got bit by the Washington and the political bug. But the 1972 senate race was my first campaign.

TS: So, you were a forensics guy, and you were doing--I actually was -- for a hot minute, I was a debate coach at a local high school. I was the assistant to a very successful real debate coach. So, I know a little bit about it. So, was it CX back then? Was it called cross exam where you like take an issue and you go back and forth?

CC: Yeah, most of the time it. Well, they had standard and cross X and your first year or two, you were generally doing standard and then we went to cross X. But it was really helpful because to me, you know, besides getting confidence and learning how to speak and learning how to research and how to organize thoughts. You know there is all of that, but you have a debate topic. I don’t know if they still do it this way or not, but for the entire year half the time you are debating the pro side and the other half the con side. You come to realize that all the truth and justice and everything generally not exclusively on one side. You get to kind of appreciate that things are a lot more
complicated than it seems. Or today, you would say that it seems on cable television. You know, after I started interning on Capitol Hill and working up there while I was in school, you find there are people that you completely disagreed with who could be really nice people. And there are people on your side that you really agreed with who were just really reprehensible human beings. And there’s not that much of a pattern. You learn to sort of separate out partisanship and ideology from what somebody is like as a person.

So, between the debate, the learning both sides and just sort of getting to meet and this is back when both sides really interacted a lot. You know, lots and lots of our friends they are you know from the other side. I grew up, you know, sort of working for a conservative Democrat. You know at one point, we were our office was across the hall from the offices of Senator Edward Brooke, who was a liberal, African-American Republican senator from Massachusetts and he and my boss didn’t vote alike much at all because the Republican was a lot more liberal than the Democrat was, but you had that. That was before the era of ideology sorting where the parties, you know, went from ideologically diverse parties to pretty monolithic parties that sort of lose the moorings. The people that used to keep a party from drifting off into crazy land, a lot of them are gone now from each side.

(TM): 06:04

TS: We know, of course, the brand The Cook Political Report. I mean it’s the eponymous brand. You have given the world some fantastic journalists.

CC: Early on you know I started it, and it was just me. And then gradually got one person, one you know it started building and early on, I did everything. But later on, the key is find people that can do that better than you can. And then get to the point size wise where they can specialize. You know David Washerman the House editor at The Cook Political Report, and he does a great cosmic political environment talk. It is very, very good, but he could just zone in on the House in a way that is far better than I ever could or even my counterpart and good friend Stu Rothenberg. You know, we were doing the House, the Senate, president. We were doing everything, and you can’t do any of it as well unless you’ve got a certain amount of specialization.

TS: When did you go to Washington? Like when did you literally go in ’72, ’73?

CC: I think ’72. September of ’72. And then left a year and a half ago. We had spent five months during the lockdown at a small little summer place that we had in Maine and decided we didn’t want to go home. So, we came back to Washington and put our house on the market and packed it up and sold it and then went up there and then
found a house. But I’m spending what—we were talking before the show started—I left town what four days ago and I don’t see Maine again until October 27 so it’s a lot of road time.

TS: You’ve been this cycle for I mean, you know, for 50 years and I guess the only saving grace is it’s every other year.

CC: It’s nice to step back and to not be in the daily rat race and to not get pulled into a lot of little things that sort of distract you. And ah you know it’s something about sitting out you know sitting out on the patio and looking out at the ocean and you can think great thoughts. Some of my fondest memories last year was walking the dog and thinking great thoughts down a country road.

TS: We should all we should all aspire to that. In fact, we should all just do that, period. Because there is a road somewhere near you and there is a dog waiting to be walked and there are great thoughts waiting to be thought. So, 50 years in Washington, lots of change right. I mean I know truly you have been tossed this question before you know you’re there 50 years. You move. You got a, I assume, a little different perspective now thinking great thoughts. walking the dog. How do you frame D.C.? How do you characterize the changes in Washington and where we are today?

CC: It’s just totally, totally different and obviously it has a lot to do with partisanship. There was a huge overlap between the two parties and there were better relationships. And you know the congressman from my home district back in those days, back when I was growing up was for a long time was Joe Waggonner, who was a conservative Democrat but was known as Nixon’s favorite Democrat in the House. There was just a lot more socialization. It was before Washington and Congress became a Tuesday/Thursday club. You could have members of Congress from different parties, different parts of the country that, you know, their kids would be in school together, on soccer teams together. We used to go on foreign junkets that yeah maybe in some ways they may have been a little bit of a waste of money, but that was where these members got to know each other. And you don’t know somebody until you travel with them and get to understand what makes them tick. I’ve often thought that Congress would be benefit greatly if every freshman member was required to go with a group of freshmen on a around the world trip. You know get an Air Force plane and stop and get briefings all over the world and get to meet each other and know each other and learn something about the world and you can’t get your committee assignments until after you’ve done that. And just hold your committee assignments hostage.

The House, you know, it’s a majority rule institution so you could have I mean the partisanship makes it less pleasant, but the place could still work. But you didn’t see that
in the Senate at all. But as you started seeing more House members coming over, moving over to the Senate, they were like bringing this contagion with them and the U.S. Senate with its rules and procedures and traditions, it can’t deal. It can’t function with that kind of partisanship. So, it was like a contagion coming from one body and entering another body. You know I don’t think the Senate is a functional institution anymore. You know, I think that’s unfortunate and because, you know, I happen to think that back before they changed the rules, you know if you wanted to filibuster something, it’s go ahead. Let’s see how big your bladder is. See how important this is to you and just let it run and ah, but when they changed the rules, and you know just simply using the F word filibuster and you could bring something to a halt that was sort of the beginning to the end and lowering thresholds for confirmations and all kinds of things like that.

(TM): 11:20

TS: So, I am sitting here thinking if that’s the contagion, how do I vaccinate state legislators, you know, not me personally, but how do we collectively vaccinate state legislators from this before it’s too late. And I think part of it is we got to hit harder on this, you know, this civility going on you know getting together. I’m thinking you know maybe they go out of the state. Maybe it’s home states that you are going to go stay for a week in the other sides.

CC: I mean I think what really set things off this direction was and I mentioned a little while ago, the loss of ideology diversity. You know the importance of Democrats having plenty of conservatives, so if Republicans have plenty of liberals, so there being moderates that are running for office and working in campaigns and giving money and, most importantly, voting in primaries. When the two parties became more ideologically cohesive, it started getting more and more of us versus them and self-righteous and sanctimonious and the old idea of agreeing to disagree. My friend who passed away a few months ago, Mark Shields, used to say I’d rather belong to a church that seeks converts than one that drives out heretics. You know, increasingly we are seeing in each party a strive for purity and that anybody that doesn’t own the party line is ostracized, is, you know, driven out of the party or marginalized or whatever. And, you know, whether it’s on the elected official’s side and then for the voter side if you just get to the point where your party is just nominating people that are so far away from you. If you are a Republican, so far to your right, or if you are a Democrat, so far to your left, you stop participating in primaries and then it becomes more self-fulfilling. And when you have two parties that don’t agree on policy, in any kind of significant policy, and they just simply have different values.
A friend of mine, Virginia state Senator Dave Marsden, we were talking one time and he said think about the last line in the Pledge of Allegiance, with liberty and justice for all. You know for conservatives, they put the emphasis on liberty and freedom and self-reliance and pull yourself up. And Democrats ... put justice, fairness, leveling the playing field. We are both supposed to like and respect both of those values, but each side sort of takes one and, you know, all but ignores the other. It takes us to a bad place.

TS: This is just such a great conversation that we need to have much longer, but I know there are people who are listening are like, OK Charlie is going to tell us see what it looks like on November the 9th. Of course, we probably won’t know on November 9th as you know. It will probably be November 16th or the 20th or something. But what’s your 30,000-foot view and then we will drill that on a couple of narrow things?

CC: I had an English professor in college that was asking the students you know kind of rhetorically okay what was this story or whatever? What was its aboutness ahm making up a word and I think that’s actually sort of the key of this election is what’s it about. Back until sometime in the first half of the summer, it was a very narrowly focused spotlight like midterm elections tend to be on the party in power--President Biden and the Democratic majority in Congress—is it stay the course versus time for a change. It was behaving almost entirely like every midterm election we’ve ever seen. And then you had several unrelated developments that I think effectively took that spotlight and widened it into more like a floodlight. It was still illuminating, you know, President Biden and the Democratic Congress and did they overreach, or did they overpromise and what kind of mistakes did they make on the economy broadened out to be a floodlight so that it was not only about Biden, but former President Trump started getting lit up in part of it. It was not just about the economy, but also about abortion. It was also about January 6th and election denying and it went from being a referendum to something of a choice election, which is certainly good for Democrats and not what Republicans would want.

I don’t think this election--it was unrealistic to expect it to stay as good as it had been for Republicans. But I think Democrats, this thing it turned in their general direction. It got better for them, but that it’s still, you know, you still have a president with a job rating of 43%. You know that is roughly where President Clinton was at this point before the ’94 disaster that Democrats had. The economy still is terrible. And while individual components may get better, gas prices came down, but other prices went up, the interest rates. And you know, I still think that Democrats have a bit of a headwind here, but it’s not 50 mile an hour headwind that it had been at one point. Its sort of gone from a really strong, you know, tailwind for Republicans, headwind for Democrats to more of a swirling around. So, Republicans I still think it’s very likely that they’d pick up the majority of the U.S. House, for example, but, and they were never going to get the 40, 50, 60 you know whatever seats. Seventy, I think. Newt at one point said it could be 40
to 70 or I think McCarthy said 60. Well, that was never going to happen. But realistically it could have been 30, 35 or something like that. And now I think its single digits or low teens with some small chance of Democrats holding on. But it’s flattened out. And the U.S. Senate, the fact that Democrats with no net change, they effectively win. And Republicans have to pick up one. And when each side has 45 seats that are either not up or safe ... I think that does give Democrats a very small edge in terms of majority in the Senate. You know the thing is that because of the strong, strong partisanship we have where you’ve got basically 45% of the vote is locked in nationally for Democrats and 45% for Republicans. You know, what that means is that each side starts off basically five points out of a majority so that there are very few cases where and even where remotely competitive states or districts where anybody is able to build out a big lead.

(TM): 18:25

TS: You said something a minute ago about how back in the summer you know it did look like this was going to be classic--time for a change, midterm romp. Legislatures in the midterms back to 1900. You’ve heard me say this a number of times – only twice has the party holding the White House gained seats in legislatures. That trend is almost the same for Congress, there maybe three times. Is there more of an X factor this time? I mean because every election, I assume, in the last few weeks you know it could swing one way or the other, but you always know this is where it is headed five weeks out, 10 weeks out. Is the X factor higher this time around with five weeks to go?

CC: Yeah. I mean I just think there is just so many races that are 2, 3, 4, 5 points that you know that last gust of wind either direction. I mean, for example, 2020 after President Trump did so badly in that September 29 debate, you know his numbers, Republican numbers around the country just plummeted and all this talk of the Blue Wave and all of that and then that last 10 days, 2 weeks, I think for a lot of the pure independents and undecideds started thinking about Blue Wave. Democrats are going to build up a bigger majority in the House and the Senate with room to spare and Biden is going to win big and what the heck was that Democratic Socialism we were hearing about defund the police and all these things. And I think, you know, at the end of the day by a slight margin they voted to replace President Trump with President Biden, but they were willing to give Biden the keys to the car but not a full tank of gas and a credit card for fear that, you know, Democrats would go too far. In that election, you went from where every Republican strategist I know was bracing themselves for a hell of a loss that there were Republicans won every single House seat that was rated tossup in the U.S. House. Every single one of them. That’s where that last gust of wind for the races that are already close, something happened late and given how many people are voting earlier, late starts earlier than it used to. But that last gust of wind can make all the difference in the world in a lot of races.
TS: So that begs the question. I don’t know how you do it, if you’ve studied the entrails of animals or you, you know, look at the stars, but what does your spider sense tell you about the gust of wind?

CC: The thing is if you say what did give Democrats that win back then. Well, it was God’s decision. It was gas prices going down by a buck. You know it was Democrats got some stuff through where they had gone through a real dry period. So, when I look from here to November 8th, I don’t see macro events that are likely to help the Democratic cause. But you know I think there is a lot of economic news and things that have a clearly bigger downside risk for Democrats between now and then. Republicans are using very skillfully the crime issue. The thing is they are taking advantage of people remembering that defund the police and granted only, you know, only a small number of crackpots in the Democratic Party ever bought into that, but it got tattooed on the entire party. That crime issue, you know, I think there are most people I think point to some heinous thing that happened the last six months in their hometown or whatever they find horrifying and they don’t remember things light.

TS: We forget that people’s decision making on this stuff is all to do with emotion and perspective has very little to do with data right. So, who knows if crime is up or down. It certainly seems that way right.

CC: Yeah, violent crime is up in the last couple of years. Now maybe related more to do with the pandemic than President Biden or something. You know, but the fascinating thing I was thinking when you were talking a little while ago and we talked about this before, the fact that the president’s party has only gained state legislative seats twice since 1900. The fact that in the U.S. House or Senate somebody can get tattooed, ‘Well, he’s a tool of president so and so.’ You could have legislators that have never been east of the Mississippi River having their races enormously affected. Why should they be blamed for Washington. And that’s why I think it’s turned that what it is more its turnout and that when you are a member of a president’s party, you might be happy or satisfied. You might be complacent. You might be a little disappointed. You may be deeply disillusioned, but you are rarely going to be ecstatic and feeling like you know I can’t wait to go out. We won two years ago, and I can’t wait to go out and vote again. That’s not very common. In the meanwhile, the members of the opposition party, members lean where people lean to, they are madder than hell that they loss two years ago. They hate everything that is happening. They want revenge. They are hypermotivated. And then you have the narrow little 10% that are the pure independents, they tend to be a fickle lot and they tend to get buyer’s remorse and who the heck knows what they intended when they voted for a party two years earlier. But they are almost always disappointed or angry at them. I think for 90% of the electorate, 90% it’s about relative
turnout between the two sides. And for the 10% in the middle, how mad are they and at who. Frankly, it’s like OK, what can go wrong between now and Election Day. And when you are the party in power, there is just a hell of a lot more that can go wrong for you. I think there is still a Republican edge, but it’s not where it was at least in the House, which is the U.S. House and let’s say state legislatures, I think Republicans will more likely have a better night than Democrats. But in the Senate, the U.S. Senate is a lot more idiosyncratic where individual races, candidates matter enormously. And let’s face it, Republican primary voters did not do their party any favors.

TS: Maybe that’s where we leave it. From you know from the deepest place I’ve got, I really appreciate you. Thank you again Charlie. I can’t wait to see you again.

CC: Well, that’s very kind of you. But NCSL does so much for best practices. You know there are 50 states and each one is a laboratory and you guys are able to basically communicate out and get out to where ideas and things and practices that have worked one place and could just as easily be leveraged up to 49 other places. It’s a vital part of the process.

TS: That’s great. I appreciate that endorsement. And we are going to stick to that, and we’ll try to schedule some time well into the future when you’ve done your post-election rounds.

CC: And we are both caught up on sleep.

TS: That’s Charlie Cook of The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter. Thanks for joining me for this episode of “Legislatures: The Inside Storey.” I am Tim Storey, the CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Go to NCSL.org to hear other interviews on podcasts that we produced and to tap into the wealth of resources we have for lawmakers and legislative staff and everybody else on major issues that legislatures are confronting in the states and territories.

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