

RUNNING FOR OUR LIVES

A Story of Faith, Politics,
and the Common Good

ROBB RYERSE

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Introduction

This story begins on Election Day 2016.

Like millions of other Americans, I was sitting on my couch watching returns trickle in as polls closed in various states. Like millions of other Americans, I expected it to be an early night with a predictable result. I thought we'd be electing our first female president and that the reality TV star would parlay his time in the political spotlight into his own television network. Like millions of other Americans, I was not prepared for what actually happened.

When Pennsylvania was called for Donald Trump, I poured myself a drink. My son Calvin and I did the math on remaining states and chatted about how it was going to end up much closer than we had anticipated. When the networks called Ohio and Michigan, it became obvious that Donald Trump was going to win the Electoral College.

About that time, my wife, Vanessa, came into the living room and shared with me some other news. That morning, a dear friend of ours had suddenly lost his infant son. She didn't have many details, but my heart and mind immediately went to my friend Alan, an extraordinary dad whose pain, I imagined, was beyond anything I could bear.

I began to weep. I cried for a long time that night. I cried uncontrollably. When I think back on it, part of me wants to

blame the whiskey, but the truth is I cried because of the deep pain I felt.

I wept for Alan and his family.

I wept for Hillary Clinton.

I wept for America.

I woke up the following day with a deep sense that I had to do something. What had taken place the night before was so unexpected, so disconcerting, so destabilizing to me that I knew inaction was no longer an option.

My first priority was to give space for the women in my life to grieve. Not only had America not elected its first female president, we had, in fact, elected a man who bragged about his mistreatment of women. Vanessa invited her friends over to lament together. I stayed quiet on social media and in person, listening first to their stories and grief.

In the ensuing days, I began engaging in conversations with friends about how they felt. It was as if I was having the same exchange over and over again.

“I just can’t believe this.”

“I know. I feel like we have to do something, like *I* have to do something.”

“I feel the same way. What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, I’m getting involved.”

And my friends did get involved. They started attending protests and rallies. They began writing letters to their senators and representatives. They organized with groups like Indivisible, Moms Demand Action, and Our Revolution. It was exhilarating to watch.

But I still wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do, how I was supposed to be involved. I just didn’t know what the election of Donald Trump was going to mean for me personally or what action I was going to take. Each day as I watched the news, feeling utterly dumbfounded, I grew increasingly convinced that I was going to have some part to play in the unfolding

drama of it all. But I could not even imagine what that would be. So I committed myself to listening and waiting until the universe made it clear.

That happened on Inauguration Day.

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Follow the Money



Treating the Symptoms and Ignoring the Disease

At the beginning of my campaign, when I was asked what issues mattered most to me, I consistently answered that I was running for Congress because I believe all Americans deserve health care, because I believe America should be a country that is welcoming of immigrants and refugees, and because I believe we need a tax system that is fair to the American people and doesn't allow the biggest corporations in the country to get away with not paying any taxes.

At the end of my campaign, when asked what issues mattered most to me, I had one simple answer: the way we fund our political campaigns. In fact, I have become convinced that unless we overhaul campaign finance, it is very unlikely we'll ever be able to solve the other biggest problems we face as a country.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, \$5.2 billion was spent on the midterm elections in 2018.⁴ The average successful congressional campaign now spends well north of a million dollars. This astronomical amount of money pays for political advertising of all kinds; pays the salaries of campaign staff; buys technology, equipment, and supplies needed in campaign offices; and makes it possible for candidates to travel all over their districts. Some of the money also goes to getting candidates' names on the ballot.

To run for office, a person has to fill out paperwork and jump through some hoops to qualify to be on the ballot. The requirements are far from standardized across the country. Some states mandate that candidates collect a certain number of signatures from registered voters to qualify, demonstrating at least a modicum of public support for the candidacy. Many other states require the candidate to pay a filing fee. Typically, that filing fee is 1 percent of the salary of the desired office, paid to the secretary of state's office in that state. For congressional races, most candidates pay \$1,750 in filing fees to run. Three states, however, allow the political parties in those states to set the filing fee. My state, Arkansas, is one of those states.

Candidates running for Congress in Georgia have to pay \$5,000 to place their names on the ballot. Florida has a filing fee of \$10,600, but candidates there can collect signatures in lieu of the fee. In 2018, the filing fee to run for Congress as a Republican in Arkansas was \$15,000, by far the highest in the entire country. In other words, no candidate for the U.S. Congress paid more to have his or her name on the ballot in 2018 than I did.

Arkansas is a bright-red state, typically rewarding the Republican nominee for president with one of the highest winning percentages in the country, but it has not always been this way. Arkansas famously gave the country President Bill Clinton and some Democratic senators over the years, but recently the state has become solidly Republican. People often ask me why the Republican Party in Arkansas is so strong and why the Democratic Party in the state seems so weak. In response, I refer them to the presidential primary of 2016.

In 2016 the Arkansas Democratic Party had a presidential filing fee of \$2,500; as a result, after Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and four other also-rans paid the fee, the Arkansas Democrats added \$15,000 to their bank account. The Republican primary had thirteen candidates, each paying \$25,000 to qualify. The Arkansas Republican Party (called Arkansas GOP, or ARGOP) added \$325,000 to its coffers from the

presidential election alone. This huge difference means that ARGOP has far more money to spend on staff, support, and advertising for its candidates. Recognizing this difference, the Arkansas Democrats have begun raising their own filing fees, setting off a campaign finance arms race in my state.

A former Arkansas Republican legislator tweeted in early 2018 that he was a part of the committee that set the fees and that its stated purpose was to make it more difficult for Republican incumbents to be challenged in primary races. In other words, the party establishment wants to make it as difficult as possible for regular people to run for office on the Republican ticket so that existing elected officials can keep their seats.⁵

Sadly, the Arkansas GOP is not alone in trying to protect incumbents. Gerrymandering is the most common tool of incumbent protection. By drawing the lines of congressional districts, state legislatures protect the seats they already control by making it impossible for someone from another party to win. It has the effect of allowing politicians to pick their voters rather than voters picking their leaders. In a few states—including Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina—federal courts have thrown out the gerrymandered districts and are requiring use of a fairer system.

In New York, the 2018 primaries for different offices are held on different days. If you lived in New York City, for instance, you might go on one day to vote in your congressional primary and then have to go back to the polls three weeks later to vote in your gubernatorial primary. This made voting more complicated, confusing voters and thus driving down turnout. The calculation was that a convoluted system benefits incumbents.

One of my Brand New Congress slatemates, Anthony Clark, ran against an incumbent congressman in Illinois. Anthony and his team diligently worked to collect the necessary signatures to qualify for the ballot, only to have their efforts undermined when his opponent challenged the signatures in court. Even though the signatures were valid and his name was eventually put on the ballot, Anthony was forced to waste precious

time, energy, and money in an unnecessary court battle. Dirty tricks like this are all too common on both sides of the aisle.

I discovered in campaigning that most people have a sense that the system is somehow rigged, but very few actually understand how.

I turned forty-three years old on January 8, 2018, and decided to use my birthday for a fund-raising event. In essence, I threw myself a party and asked my friends to pay to come to it. Right before they sang to me and we cut the cake, I thanked my friends for coming and then told the assembled crowd that their donations that night were going to help me pay to get my name on the ballot. When I said that the fee was fifteen thousand dollars, there was an audible gasp in the room. People simply had no idea what it actually costs to run for office.

The outrageous cost of political campaigns is not a problem, however, for candidates who accept money from corporate political action committees (PACs). While the federal limit in 2018 for individuals' donations to a candidate was twenty-seven hundred dollars per election, PACs could donate five thousand dollars per election. Most incumbents spend time courting corporate PAC donors and being courted by them. My opponent, Steve Womack, had over a million dollars in his campaign war chest before our campaign even started, the vast majority of which came not from small-dollar donors but from corporate PACs and their representatives.

Corporate PACs are not the only problem. So-called Super-PACs have no limit on what they can collect and spend on behalf of a candidate, as long as they don't coordinate directly with the campaign. People like the Koch brothers and George Soros gain political influence by setting up SuperPACs and investing in the candidates they believe will do their bidding when in office. Wealthy evangelicals have also recognized the opportunity afforded by SuperPACs and have funneled tens of millions of dollars into them to influence elections in recent years.

All Brand New Congress candidates, myself included, agreed

on principle that big corporations and special-interest groups have an outsized influence on our political system because of how campaigns are financed. We each pledged to put the needs of people first by refusing SuperPAC support and corporate PAC money. We relied completely on the small-dollar donations of regular working people across the country who believed in what we were trying to accomplish.

But even that was more difficult for me. When Brand New Congress launched, they used a donation platform called ActBlue. ActBlue was set up to make it easier for Democratic candidates to crowdsource their campaigns by collecting money from small-dollar donors. Even though they publicly advocate for progressive policies such as universal health care and combating climate change, ActBlue refused to let me use their platform simply because I was not a Democrat. While it is well within their prerogative to make decisions about how to run their business, ActBlue's policy kept me from being able to benefit from tandem fund-raisers for BNC's candidates.

The workaround that we used was a different crowdsourcing platform called CrowdPac. Its user base is much smaller than ActBlue, but it enabled me to collect the donations I needed to run my campaign. However, with only a few precious weeks left before my primary date, the CrowdPac board of directors fired its founder for his public support of President Trump and suspended the accounts of all Republicans using the platform. At the most critical juncture, I had to spend time and resources proving to CrowdPac that I opposed the president's agenda in order to have my fund-raising restored.

Money in politics is a problem.

The travails of raising enough money to qualify to be on the ballot and to run my campaign forced me to think a lot about how campaigns are funded. I realized for the first time that all of the issues I care about are symptoms of our campaign finance system. That system is actually the disease.

The ultimate loyalty of elected officials is not to the people who vote for them but to those corporate PACs and

special-interest groups that actually fund their campaigns. Even though polling shows broad consensus on many issues facing the nation, progress is actually impeded because if our elected leaders were to act on those issues in accordance with voters' wishes, the officeholders would have to defy the entities that helped get them elected.

For instance, the majority of Americans, including Republicans, support overhauling our health-care system by implementing Medicare for All. However, elected officials on both sides of the aisle refuse to enact this reform because the pharmaceutical and insurance companies that donate millions of dollars to their campaigns oppose it.

Increasing the military budget seems to be the only thing in Washington that has bipartisan support. We spend more on defense than the next thirteen countries in the world combined, yet every year Congress overwhelmingly votes to spend more. I believe this happens because defense contractors invest millions of dollars ensuring the reelection of Republican and Democratic incumbents.

The same is true on just about every issue—from gun reform to climate change, from agriculture to tax reform.

When I dug more into this issue, I was most surprised to learn how campaign finance even impacts immigration reform. Our current immigration system makes it very difficult for people to enter our country with proper documentation. As a result, millions of people have immigrated without this documentation. When they are caught by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), they are placed in detention centers. Congress requires ICE to keep its detention centers at at least 90 percent capacity to retain its funding from the federal government. ICE agents thus have a monetary motivation to detain undocumented people. Nine of the ten largest ICE detention centers in the United States are operated by three for-profit prison companies that have received federal contracts. Those three for-profit prison companies have donated millions of dollars to the campaigns of the very congresspeople who wrote and passed these regulations.

Not only policy is shaped by the influence of big money, so are the political parties. Both parties want congresspeople to spend hours each day calling wealthy corporate donors, trying to raise money, not just for themselves but also for their party and its affiliates. People have asked me how it is possible for a freshman congresswoman like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to be so well-prepared in committee hearings. The answer I always give is that since she is not like every other representative, who is dependent on corporate donors and therefore spending 70 percent of his or her time fund-raising, she actually has time to be prepared to do her job.

A congressperson who can raise a lot of money for the party is likely to get plum committee assignments in the House of Representatives. In January 2018, Congressman Womack became chair of the Budget Committee, a powerful and coveted position. A Politico article at the time suggested that he didn't win this privilege based on seniority or expertise. Rather, he had raised more money for the Republican Party than anyone else who was up for the seat.⁶ Essentially, using big-money campaign donations, Congressman Womack bought himself the chair of a committee.

If you want to understand why your representatives aren't taking action on the issues that matter most to you, follow the money.

With a much better understanding of how campaign finance actually works and its impact on our system, I began to emphasize to voters in my district that this is the single most important issue we face as a country. Unless we take specific steps, the loyalty of our leaders will never be with the voters and will remain with the corporations that fund their campaigns. I advocated to voters, and continue to do so, for the following three policies to be enacted.

First, we need to publicly fund elections. As long as the primary source of funding of political campaigns is corporate PACs and special-interest groups, the will of the people will be subjugated. Some Democrats and Republicans alike who have

recognized the campaign finance crisis have suggested that a tax credit of up to two hundred dollars per person for donations to campaigns would radically increase the number of people who participate in the election process through donating. Since politicians have proven that their loyalty is with those who fund their campaigns, we need to make sure that those funders are the American people rather than corporations.

Second, we need to limit campaign spending. Since the government has already limited what individuals can donate to a candidate, I believe it would be wise to also limit what those candidates can spend. Limiting spending levels the playing field for grassroots campaigns challenging incumbents and decreases the need for politicians to amass huge war chests from corporate donors. It also makes it so that people who run for office don't have to be independently wealthy to do so. This reform would also have the welcome by-product of shortening our now-perpetual election season, since candidates would need to save their money to spend it when it would have the most impact—close to Election Day. Granted, if we were to limit campaign spending, consultants and lobbyists would have to find jobs somewhere other than the political industrial complex, but the overall benefits far outweigh this inconvenience.

Third, we need to repeal *Citizens United*. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in a case called *Citizens United v. the FEC* that political spending on behalf of a candidate by corporations is protected speech and therefore cannot be restricted by the federal government. This opened the floodgates of SuperPAC money into our system and changed American politics. The reality is that corporations are not people with constitutional protections. In all likelihood, overturning *Citizens United* would require an amendment to the Constitution, but given the crisis to our democracy caused by unfettered corporate spending, such a drastic step is not only prudent but necessary.

While I fully believe these proposals are necessary, I have very little hope that the politicians who benefit from the current system will ever enact the changes. But we don't have to wait for politicians to lead on campaign finance reform. This

is one area where we the people have far more power than we realize.

If a majority of Americans wake up to the reality of how big money has corrupted our system and our leaders in the process, and if a majority of Americans made a commitment to simply refuse to vote for any politician, regardless of party affiliation, who takes money from corporate PACs, enough pressure would be exerted on candidates to swear off corporate money. A *Wall Street Journal* / NBC poll in 2016 showed that the leading issue for voters was that wealthy donors and corporations have too much influence over who wins our elections. A consensus is growing, and politicians are taking notice. Several candidates for president in 2020 have recognized this trend and made a pledge not to take corporate PAC money. We need to keep the pressure on politicians until the idea of taking corporate money becomes a debilitating liability for all candidates for office.

As a person of faith and a pastor, I can't help but think about the life and example of Jesus when I'm considering issues. When I read the Gospels, I find a Jesus who was deeply suspicious of those who used wealth to gain influence. He refused to give preferential treatment to the rich and well-connected. He consistently sided with the poor and oppressed and denounced the powerful. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24 that it is impossible to serve both God and money. I believe it is also impossible to serve both money and the needs of people.

It is a moral imperative for people who follow the example and teachings of Jesus to work toward America having a political system that protects every person's right to participate in the process, ensures that no person is disenfranchised, and doesn't value corporate donors and political lobbyists more highly than average citizens.

For me, the deadline to file with the Arkansas secretary of state was May 1, 2018. On that morning, Calvin, Scott, and I, with the documentary crew in tow, made the three-and-a-half-hour

drive to Little Rock so that I could officially register my campaign. We walked into the rotunda of the capitol and found a series of tables set up that I had to visit in succession. The first place I went was to the ARGOP table. After shaking hands with the state party chair, I sat at the table and filled out some paperwork. When I finished, the clerk said matter-of-factly, “That will be fifteen thousand dollars.”

As I pulled out my checkbook to write the biggest single check I had ever written in my life, I noticed some signage on the table. In a clear plastic holder, a printed piece of paper listed the cost of running for each respective office in 2018 in Arkansas. It reminded me of a church bake sale where one might read that a slice of apple pie cost three dollars or chocolate chip cookies were three for five dollars.

“U.S. Congress: \$15,000.”

With gratitude for the hundreds of people who had made small-dollar donations because they believed in my campaign, I committed myself to be their voice should I make it to Washington and to never become a politician who could be bought and sold. And then I wrote the fifteen-thousand-dollar check.

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