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Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for having me here. Dean, thank you for that kind introduction and thank you for letting me be able to speak to you here. My parents will be so proud that I'm in a law school. I remember when I won the Rhodes Scholarship. My dad, you know, I called home and I'm like, dad, mom, I just won the Rhodes Scholarship and my dad was like, does this mean you're not taking the LSATs anymore? So, you all are making my parents so proud.

But look, more broadly, I want to thank the Katzman family and recognize their work in continuing Robert's legacy. Judge Katzmman had this line that really stuck with me. He said, quote, "if we as a country are to continue to tackle our problems, even as there are increasing doubts about the effectiveness of governmental institutions, then there must be a shared appreciation about the constitutional system underlying those institutions." Judge Katzmman believed if that appreciation is lost, that quote, all that will be left will be a corrosive cynicism about the perceived failings of that system. The consequences of which, quote, "can only be harmful to the fabric of our country. I wanted to share that, and I wanted to share just some of my experiences in politics and in public service, and where we have to go from here.

In 2018, I, as a Democrat, won a congressional district that Trump won in 2016 and then, in 2020, Trump won my congressional district again, but so did I. And I was one of only seven Democrats in the country to win a district that Trump won that year. And I found that pretty interesting because, like, we're pretty different people. So, I held a series of focus groups with people who voted for Trump and voted for me and basically asked the singular question of why? Why did you do that? And it was interesting because down in DC, people will talk about my old congressional district as a swing district, and they talk about it as if there's a blue army and a red army duking it out every single day. But my own experience working in this kind of district is that the vast, vast, vast, vast majority of people my congressional district, in a swing district, can't stand either party. They are so concerned about the deep fundamentals, a deep cynicism writ large about politics. And that is why I wanted to talk to you today. And that is why I wanted to talk to you today about an issue that I heard in those focus groups, and I've heard every single day from the people that I represent, which is a question about corruption in our politics.

Now, my entry point for understanding corruption and thinking about it as a priority is different from most. I began my career in public service, working in national security. As mentioned, I was a civilian advisor out in Afghanistan working to advise four-star generals. I worked as a director at the White House National Security Council on fighting against



terrorism in Iraq. And I saw in both places, both Iraq and Afghanistan, crippling effects of corruption. In Iraq we saw corruption lead to a country that was not only less prosperous, but less secure. I saw prime ministers and the highest-level officials grabbing as much as they could, running the work as if it was Tony Soprano's waste management business. It was, in part, the corruption that made the Iraqi government weaker when they faced the rise of the terrorist group ISIS. In Afghanistan, corruption undercut the legitimacy of the government. It cost the government billions of dollars and ultimately the faith of the Afghan people.

While I was out there, I was in charge of creating a framework, which we call trip wires, to try to understand and measure how corrupt a country's politics are. So, we measured if a government starts doling out jobs as patronage. Measure whether there are conflicts of interest that are being abused, or political figures enriching themselves by selling off influence and government contracts or directing government spending in ways that benefit their family or supporters. They were shutting down media and journalism watchdogs and anti-corruption organizations, or the expectation of bribery for the completion of assistance of government work and benefits. All of that we saw rampant. And I'll tell you; I never thought that when I was creating these tripwires that I would see abroad, what I saw abroad, here at home, that I would see these tripwires I measured abroad, triggered here within our own government. But here we are.

We saw Trump in his first term, refusing to divest from businesses and as a result, if you wanted something from the administration, many sought to go to Mar-A-Lago or Bedminster or the Trump Hotel. But I'll be honest, Trump corruption was deeply rooted in our politics well before Trump. And we may not have seen it as industrialized as we do today. But for years we've seen corporate money flooding into our politics, the conflicts of interest, the voice of everyday people repeatedly silenced and heard about it nonstop on the campaign trail.

When I came into Congress, I saw firsthand the incredible power that corruption has. And look, I get it. I'm in the Senate by virtue of a corruption scandal in New Jersey. I remember exactly where I was when I got worried about the indictment of my predecessor, Senator Menendez. I was actually taking my kids to a doctor's appointment that day, and while the doctor was in the room, my phone started buzzing. I quickly glanced at it and I asked why? Why is someone sending me a photo of gold bars? I don't understand what's happening. I drop my kids back off at school. I went home and I read into the articles and I have to say, I felt so disappointed. But it wasn't just disappointment in an individual. Wasn't just disappointment in my senator. It was a disappointment in a system that constantly seems like it lets us down.



And it wasn't just me that felt that way. I remember talking to my neighbor on that day. Our kids were playing in the front yard together, and I went to my neighbor and I said, what did you think about the news about the indictment of our senator? And my neighbor said, "That's Jersey." That's Jersey. And with a shrug. And look, my neighbor is not alone. I'm not alone. Just a few months before that, there was a survey in New Jersey, 80, 84, 84% of people in New Jersey surveyed believe that their elected officials are corrupt. And that's not just in New Jersey. I know some of you were like, what's wrong with the other 16% Right? It's like, no, but it's like, not even just Jersey. I mean, like, we're seeing this all throughout the country that concern. And I think that that is something where we saw, again, it's not just about the individuals in New Jersey. The very ballot system that we use for our elections was designed to let powerbrokers, not voters, decide who won primary elections.

It was my own party in New Jersey that was in part perpetuating this corruption. I was not supposed to win my election for Senate. I was not supposed to be a senator. I didn't put in the work to kiss the rings. I'm from the wrong part of the state. I'm the wrong age and the wrong ethnicity. I heard it all. But politics shouldn't be just some exclusive club for the well-off and the well-connected. And what we did to sue the state of New Jersey and deeply weaken the political machine was only possible because of an anti-corruption movement that we are a part of and building stronger every day. And now I'm taking what I learned in New Jersey to our work at the federal level, to the United States Senate, where, once again, I find myself in a moment of deep anger and frustration.

People ask me, from your experience in Congress, is it as bad as it seems or is it overblown? And I'm sad to say that the corruption with a capital "C", I see it manifested in special interests and patronage, and it's honestly worse than I expected before I went in. I'll be honest with you. I'm tired of this all, and I don't want to accept it anymore but I'm also understanding how hard it will be to change. I have this line that I've been saying for the last couple of years where I say, "I believe that the opposite of democracy is apathy", and I believe it to my core that democracy is about engagement. The opposite of which is a sense of helplessness that leads to withdrawal and disengagement. So, I've decided to dedicate my life's work to trying to fix our broken politics and give our democracy the kind of governance it deserves. The kind of governance that the American people deserve. And I know very well I could fall short given the magnitude of the problems, but I feel a need to try. And I have come to see that the problems of corruption, broken politics affect my ability to get things done in every other policy issue that I want to work on. It is so core and fundamental.



And as I do this work, I learn from my experiences in New Jersey that this can't be done reactionary. I can't just fight back against each specific manifestation of corruption. I've diagnosed the problem is not episodic, it's systemic. So, I can of course speak out. But a whack-a-mole approach is not going to yield the systemic change that is needed.

So, a question is, well, what are we trying to build then? What is the vision that I want to see for our democracy and governance? Now, I wanted to give you a couple of guiding principles for what I believe the American people deserve for a politics free of corruption.

First, the citizen is the core unit of our democracy, not political parties, not the dollar sign. The centrality of the citizen must be protected. A perfect example of this is with partisan gerrymandering. There is a very simple way to frame what should be happening that voters choose politicians, not politicians choosing voters. Now, partisan gerrymandering should be illegal and replaced with nonpartisan commissions in every single state. This should be done nationally. This is also what contrasts with the recent efforts by this administration to push something called the SAVE America Act. It's the legislation that would make it harder for citizens to vote, especially seniors and students and women and voters of color. Its aim was supposedly to stop voter fraud, but without actually providing today the data to show that this was such a major problem that needed to be cured, that it would potentially disenfranchise many citizens. So, when Trump says a loud part there, the quiet part out loud, that the SAVE America Act would stop Democrats from winning for 50 years, he further so the weaponization of our politics.

Number two, if the goal is to uphold the power of citizens and give voters a real choice, then there needs to be every effort to level the playing field between candidates. In my opinion, only people, not corporations or other entities, should be able to donate to campaigns with fixed maximum totals. We should not allow outside money, including super PACs, to be able to continue to change the landscape of our politics and in fact, the behaviors of so many people.

I think the Citizens United decision will go down in history as one of the most destructive events in our democracy, and the ruling must be overturned. I'll be honest with you, if I had my way, I would go even a step further. I would love to see a situation where people can only donate to campaigns where they can vote in or another way to say it is, I think we should only allow candidates to raise money from people who could vote for them. I know that this is probably at this point a far-fetched idea, but from my own experiences, you know, to be able to have a situation where someone running for Congress can raise from their own district or a senator from their state, or the president, of course, for the whole country. But from a candidate perspective that would incentivize candidates to spend all of



their time where they should be. Talking to their voters, their potential constituents, not jetting off to New York City, no offense, Silicon Valley in San Francisco, Martha's Vineyard, the Hamptons, LA, and elsewhere, all lovely places. But the current system only fuels the creation of an elite class. That turbocharge is the disconnect from working Americans. I also don't think that self-funding should exist.

I ran four campaigns against four separate self-funders. It was a great honor to be able to do that. I'll be honest, it's like playing chess against someone with all queens.

Someone should only be able to give to their own campaign the maximum that someone else can be able to give. I don't see why they should be allowed to be able to have that kind of opportunity, like, you know, that I described.

I've also spoken out publicly against a practice that we have seen recently from people in both political parties, where we've seen an incumbent say that they are running for reelection, but at the last minute they drop out and hand their chosen successor. A hand chosen successor then registers as a candidate at the last second. You know, this is done intentionally to deceive the voters. It goes against the very core of the power of the citizen, which is the ability for them to be able to make a choice. And I'm working on legislation to try and stop this, but I'll be honest, it's sad that we keep seeing this kind of behavior to start with.

Third, as we protect the citizens in elections, we protect the interests and the security of the people of our country, within our governance. No one working for the government, nor their families should be allowed to personally profit off of the decisions that they make, the work that they do, and the inside knowledge that they have. Several years ago, I wrote legislation that would ban members of Congress from owning and trading stocks. At the time, many in politics thought that the handful of us pushing this concept were throwing away our careers, that we would lose favor with our party leadership and colleagues would diminish our influence. And I can't tell you how many of my colleagues got upset at me, and one yelled at me once and said, "You don't trust me?" And I said back, "It's not about you personally. It's about the system. The fact that the American people are not going to be able to meet every single elected official in our country and determine their trustworthiness. We need safeguards."

Now, several years later, I'm proud to see that the issue of banning stock trading has become a basic litmus test for so many candidates. But I want more. My legislation differs from some of the others out there by having a single standard across all three branches of government. In the same way, I don't want members of Congress to trade stocks, I also don't want the president or the vice president or the cabinet officials, senior government



officials, even the Supreme Court. We make decisions that affect individual companies as well as entire sectors, and that is something that we have to be able to protect. Fourth, the concern isn't just among politicians enriching themselves. No government employee should ever make decisions, provide assistance or share information specifically designed to enrich family, friends or supporters.

Now, this is something that I think the American people deserve to have assurances. The decisions that I make, and others make, are always driven by what's best for the country. A major manifestation of this right now is about the pardon power. Pardons are clearly being abused, and the power needs to be reformed. We need to show how we are able to make sure that we are shutting down this effort, where people are sometimes getting paid millions of dollars to be able to try to help secure a pardon. These are efforts that we have to be able to show that we are standing up against.

Fifth, we should never assume that politicians and government officials can uphold these standards on their own. Transparency is a must, and the operations to provide transparency cannot and should not be controlled or monitored by those that is intended to monitor.

Last December, a bill came before the New Jersey State Senate that would have gutted one of our watchdog agencies called the office of the Comptroller. Members of my own party were pushing this effort, prompting me as well as our former attorney general from New Jersey and others to show up in person and testify in Trenton. Democratic leaders in New Jersey insulted me, insulted us, attempted to silence us, but when we shined a light on their actions, we were able to generate the public pressure that ultimately killed that bill. But we see similar actions happening constantly at the state and national level, because in politics there is often a sense that there is no wrongdoing if no one can see what you are doing.

Sixth, there must be real and credible enforcement and consequences for those that do harm to our democracy. Well, they sought to enrich themselves or others, or to abuse the trust of people in other ways. The Supreme Court has taken several steps to make it harder to combat political corruption. The case *McDonnell v. U.S.* changed the standards for what official acts that a government official can do to benefit others. Instead of trying to address the courts issues directly, which others have tried, my bill would expand the federal bribery statute to explicitly criminalize corrupt access to public officials. The 2024 Supreme Court ruling, ruling *Snyder v U.S.*, made it such that if a state or local elected official does a favor for someone and receives money afterwards as a tip, that's okay. Now, if a state or local



official received that money beforehand, that would be a bribe. But a gratuity afterwards is all right. We all know that's wrong.

These rulings are based on statute, not the Constitution, and therefore I'm working on legislative changes to the statutes to try and close these holes that the Supreme Court has blown open. Accountability is necessary and if you need any further reason, think of Corey Lewandowski, someone who has no business in public service, but someone who worked as a special government employee, an SGE. The same status as Elon Musk. A status that must not be allowed to continue to be a loophole to prevent financial disclosures and conflicts of interest. There must be changes to ensure that no one working for the government, especially at the level that Musk and Lewandowski have, can keep outside employment and not have to disclose and divest. But what I want to draw attention to here is Lewandowski allegedly told coworkers that he could do whatever he wanted to do because Trump would pardon him. Without accountability, corruption soars.

Which leads me to my seventh and final principle. Now, some of my colleagues I have debated say that we shouldn't do stock trading bans because we need to attract businesspeople and successful people into Congress. What I say in response is that I get to work a job whose job description is in the Constitution of the United States. It's a deeply humbling experience, and what we are trying to do is find 535 people, 100 in the House, oh, 100 in the Senate, 435 in the House, that are people who are not going to be motivated by profit. About two centuries ago, there was a surge of patronage that led to corruption. It was called the spoils system as we know it during and after Jackson's presidency, which created the Civil War. What Civil war hero in the United States, Senator Carl Schurz called a hotbed of corruption. Now, Senator Schurz, in a speech on the Senate floor in 1871, said that the corruption of the spoils system, quote, "Insinuates itself like a subtle poison." Now, Senator George Hoar, who also served during this era, would later go down to write, quote, "Political corruption in high places is a most formidable peril to any government and if it be not encountered and overcome fatal to a republic." Now, fortunately, it was encountered by an investment in service. Congress passed the Pendleton Act, which, while not perfect, work to establish a civil service based on merit. And over the course of nearly 150 years since its passage, America has repeatedly seen the high tide of corruption washed away with the low tide of reform.

Our country and our government have been troubled and tested by corruption again and again and again. And the challenge of corruption, as then Senator John F. Kennedy said on the campaign trail in 1960, was a tragic, was "tragic in the public sense", resulting in "justice denied, taxes wasted and problems ignored." He went on to say that history teaches us that no party has a monopoly on honesty. Both parties attract their share of



crooks and weaklings, but that does not mean that these problems are incapable of solution. I have laid out six principles so far that try to contain and limit corruption, try to protect the citizen, trying to limit the worst impulses of those in power. But that is not enough. Kennedy, three months after that statement I just read, issued a powerful and necessary action to counter corruption. He called on us and said, "what you can do for your country." And this is my seventh and final principle. Corruption cannot be countered solely through restraints and containment. Corruption must be overridden by deep and profound sense of public service. We need a new "ask, not what this country can do for you" moment to usher in a new era of public service right now.

If the opposite of democracy is apathy, then the opposite of public corruption is public service. Service can build opportunities. It can build community, and it can build a government that keeps people as the priority, not those who hold power. Last year, I introduced a package of bills called the "Answer the Call Agenda". My goal was to start a national conversation on what reorienting our government around service could do to help build opportunities.

I introduced bills that created scholarship programs for students to intern in county and municipal government, encouraging young people to get involved. We tried to expand opportunities for Americans to serve through AmeriCorps and Peace Corps, and one codifies and strengthens the Presidential Management Fellowship Program, a program that was instrumental to my own path of service, one that was gutted and crushed by this current administration.

We see over and over again the types of things that we need to do to try to promote public service. There is a reason why the first actions of Trump were to fire inspector generals and to unleash DOGE to demonize and terrorize government workers. There is a reason why the OMB director, Russell Vought, said he wants to traumatize public servants and make them wake up every morning feeling like they are the enemy. And that is something we have to counter. We have to try to continue to build up our public service, the work to rebuild the trust of the American people by making sure that people are always given an opportunity to have their voice heard. That is, after all, what a more perfect union looks like. A country that delivers justice, tranquility, defense and welfare for the people.

For all people. I know it is an incredibly challenging effort, but it's important. And we have to quote Judge Katzmman when he says, quote, "Weighty responsibilities to achieve the fair and effective administration of justice and to maintain the trust and confidence of the public." We serve to meet those responsibilities. We serve to deliver justice and earn trust. We serve to form a more perfect union.



And as I close here, I want to speak to the students listening. I've been in your shoes before. I know the decisions ahead for you. Choices to make, starting salaries to weigh. My challenge to you tonight is if you share some of what I said tonight, the concerns about corruption, if you are worried about the trajectory of our democracy, what are you willing to do about it? The challenges we face can't be solved through legislation alone. We don't live in a time where there is politics as usual. I believe we need to build a movement, an anti-corruption movement that will help fight against the apathy, against the helplessness, against the anti-bodies of the status quo.

I shared with you that statistic of 84% of people in New Jersey thinks that their elected officials are corrupt. While that is a devastating indictment on our politics, I also see it as an opportunity, because I see that that is 84% of people across the political spectrum that hopefully will be able to join our movement on fighting corruption, and we need to restore trust back into our government and ignite a new era of public service in our nation. And I ask humbly that you join us. Thank you.