

Thank you, Dean McKenzie and the staff here at the NYU School of Law for having me here today.

I want to thank the Katzmman family and recognize their work in continuing Robert's legacy.

“If we as a country are to continue to tackle our problems, even as there are increasing doubts about the effectiveness of governmental institutions,” said Judge Katzmman in 2019, “Then there must be a shared appreciation about the constitutional system underlying those institutions.”

Judge Katzmman believed if that appreciation is lost, “...all that will be left will be a corrosive cynicism about the perceived failings of that system...”

The consequences of which, “can only be harmful to the fabric of our country.”

In 2018 I, as a democrat, won a congressional district that Trump won in 2016.

In 2020, Trump won my district again. But so did I. I was one of only 7 democrats in the country to win a district that Trump won that year.

I found that to be crazy, because we are pretty different people.

So I held a series of focus groups with people who voted for Trump and voted for me and basically asked.... Why....?

Down in DC people talk about my old congressional district as this swing district where a blue army and a red army duke it out everyday. But my experience was different. What I saw was that the vast vast majority of people can't stand either party.

There is deep cynicism writ large about politics.

There are many reasons for that cynicism. But one that keeps coming up time and time again is **CORRUPTION.**

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 a civilian advisor, I worked in Afghanistan, advising the Four-Star Generals in charge of our operations.

As a director at the White House National Security Council, I worked on Iraq a little more than a decade after the United States invaded.

I saw in both places the crippling effect 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 their work as if it was Tony Soprano's waste management business.

It was, in part, corruption that made the Iraqi government weaker when faced with the rise of 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.

I created a framework of what I called tripwires to understand and measure how corrupt a country's politics are.

Measure if a government starts doling out jobs as patronage

Measure when there are conflicts of interest that are being abused.

Political figures enriching themselves by selling off influence and government contracts, or directing government spending in ways that benefit their family or supporters.

The shutting down of media and journalism and watchdog/ anti corruption organizations.

The expectation of bribery for the completion or assistance of government work and benefits.

I never thought at the time that I would see what I saw abroad here at home. That I would see these tripwires I measured abroad triggered here at home.

But here we are. We saw Trump in his first term refusing to divest from his businesses. As a result, if you wanted something from Trump, you just had to pay up – at Mar-a-Lago, or Bedminster, or the Trump Hotel.

But I'll be honest, corruption was deeply rooted in our politics well before Trump. We may not have seen it as industrialized as we do now. But for years we've seen corporate money flooding into our politics...the conflicts of interest...the voice of everyday people repeatedly silenced...and I heard about it non-stop on the campaign trail.

When I came to Congress, I saw first-hand the incredible power corruption has. Look, I'm in the Senate by virtue of a corruption scandal in NJ. I remember exactly where I was when I got word of Senator Menendez's indictment.

Taking kids to the doctor. My phone buzzing. Why is someone sending me a photo of gold bars?

But then I realized why. And I felt so disappointed. Not just in my Senator. But in a system that is broken and exploited.

It wasn't just me that felt that way. I remember talking with my neighbor that day and asked what do you think the indictment of Menendez. their response was, "that's New Jersey" with a shrug.

They were not alone.

Just a few months before, a survey showed that 84 percent of New Jersey residents thought their politicians were corrupt.

I know what some of you are thinking. What about the other 16 percent?

Unfortunately in New Jersey, it wasn't just the politicians who were corrupt, it was our politics.

The very ballot itself was designed to let power brokers, not voters, decide who won primary elections. And it was my own party that was perpetuating this corruption.

I was not supposed to win my election. 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, the wrong ethnicity.

But politics shouldn't be some exclusive club for the well off and the well connected.

What we did to sue the state of NJ and deeply weaken the political machine was only possible because of an anti-corruption movement that we are building.

Now I'm taking what I learned in NJ 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 directly in politics, is it as bad as it seems? Or is it overblown?

I'm sad to say that corruption with a capital C... corruption that manifests in "special interests" and patronage...

it's worse than I expected.

The impact of money on politics. And it has several profound impacts.

— it affects how much time members of congress and other electeds spend fundraising

—it allows billionaires, big corporations and special interests to jump to the front of the line

—but it also affects the kinds of people that step up to run for office to start with.

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.

I believe the opposite of democracy is apathy. I believe this to my core. That democracy is about engagement. The opposite is a sense of helplessness that leads to withdrawal and disengagement.

**I've decided to dedicate my life's work to fixing our broken politics.** I know I could very well fall short given the magnitude of the problems, but I feel a need to try, as I have come to see that the problems of corruption and broken politics affect my ability to get anything done on any other policy issue.

As I do this work, I learned from my experiences in NJ that I can't just be 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 isn't going to yield the systemic change that is needed.

The question is what are we trying to build towards? What is the vision that I want to see for our democracy and governance?

I wanted to give you some of the 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 simple way to frame what should be happening. Voters choose politicians, not politicians choosing voters. Partisan gerrymandering should be illegal and replaced with non-partisan commissions in every state. This should be done nationally.

This is also what contrasts with the recent legislation that Trump's been pushing called the SAVE America Act. It's legislation that would make it harder for citizens to vote, especially seniors, students, women, and voters of color. Its aim was supposedly to stop voter fraud, but without actually providing any data to show that this was such a major problem as

to need a cure that would potentially disenfranchise many citizens.

When Trump says out loud that the SAVE America Act would stop Democrats from winning for 50 years, he further sows the weaponization of our politics.

**Second**, if the goal is to uphold the power of citizens and give voters a real choice, then **there needs to be as close to a level playing field between candidates as possible.**

In my opinion, only people – not corporations or other entities – should be able to donate to campaigns with fixed total maximums. We should not allow outside money including SUPERPACs. 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.

If I had my way, I would love to see a situation where people can only donate to campaigns where they can vote in. Or another way to say this is to only

allow candidates to raise money from people who could vote for them. So congress from a district, senate from a state, president from the nation. From a candidate perspective, that would incentivize candidates to spend all of their time where they should be, with their voters, not jetting off to NYC (no offense), SF/Silicon Valley, Martha's Vineyard, Hamptons, LA, etc. The current system only fuels the creation of an elite class and turbocharges the disconnect from working Americans.

I also don't think self funders should exist. I ran 4 campaigns against 4 separate self-funders. It's like playing chess against someone with all queens. Someone should only be able to give to their campaign the same amount everyone else is able to.

It's also why I have spoken out publicly against a practice that we have seen people in both parties use, where the incumbent says they are running for re-election, but at the last minute they drop out and their hand chosen successor registers as a candidate. This is wrong. It goes against the very core of the power of the citizen. It takes their power

of choice away from them. I'm working on legislation to try and stop this, but it's sad that we keep seeing this behavior to start with.

**Third, as we protect the citizen in elections, we protect the interests and 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 they make, the work they do, and the inside knowledge 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 party leadership and colleagues and would diminish our influence. And I can't tell you how many of my colleagues got so upset at me. One yelled at me and said "you don't trust me?" I said it is never about any individual person. The American people aren't able to meet every single elected in our country and

determine their trustworthiness. We need safeguards.

Now, several years later, I'm proud to see that this issue of banning stock trading has become a basic litmus test for candidates.

But I want more. My legislation differs from others as I have the only legislation that calls for a single standard against all 3 branches of government. The President, the VP, the cabinet. Senior gov officials and the Supreme Court and other members of the federal judiciary. We make decisions that affect individual companies as well as entire sectors. I had colleagues of mine on the Armed Services Committee invested in defense contractors. That's wrong.

**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.** Some of the best advice I ever got about politics was a line from

a former member of Congress. He told me to make sure I reach out to my friends because “your friends won’t call often because they love you and worry about taking up your busy time, but there will be plenty of others who will have no reservations in trying to take up your time.” There is no shortage of people who come to me with specific or general asks. Some were supporters of mine, some people I’ve known, some prominent people from NJ or across the country. The American people deserve to have assurance that decisions I make and others in government are always driven by what’s best for the country.

A major manifestation of this problem is what we see about the Pardon power. Pardons are clearly being abused and powers should be reformed. We need to shut down how people are getting paid millions of dollars to help secure pardons. Anyone getting paid any amount to help get a pardon should have to disclose and register as an agent and be held to ethics standards.

**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 by those being monitored.**

Last December, a bill came before the NJ 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 to do something I haven't done before, which is to show up in person and testify in Trenton. Democratic leaders in NJ insulted me and attempted to silence me, but when we shined a light on their actions, we were able to generate the public pressure that ultimately killed the bill.

But we see similar actions happening constantly at the state and national levels. 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**, whether they sought to enrich themselves or others, or to abuse the trust of the people in other ways. The Supreme Court has taken several steps to make it harder to combat political corruption. The case *McDonnell v United States* changed what the standard was for “official acts” that a government official can do to benefit others. Instead of trying to address the Court’s 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 *Snyder v United States* made it such that if a state or local elected official does a favor for someone and receives money afterwards as a tip, that is ok. If that state or local received the money before, it would be a bribe, but a gratuity afterwards is alright. That’s wrong.

These rulings are based on statutes, not on 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. If you need any further reason, think of Corey Lewandowski, someone who has no business in public service. Someone who worked as a Special Government Employee (SGE), the same status that Elon Musk was. A status that must not be allowed to continue to be a loop hole to prevent financial disclosures and conflicts of interest. There must be changes that 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 that Lewandowski allegedly told coworkers that he could do “whatever” he wanted because Trump would pardon him. Without accountability, corruption soars.

Which leads me to my seventh and final principle:

Some of my colleagues that I debate say we shouldn't do a stock trading ban because we need to attract business people and successful people in congress. What I say in response is that I get to work a job that has a job description written in the

Constitution of the United States. That is a deeply humbling experience. we are looking for 535 people out of a nation of 340M people that are motivated not by profit.

About two centuries ago, there was a surge of patronage that led to corruption. The “spoils system” as it was know during and after Jackson’s presidency created what Civil War hero and United States Senator Carl Shurz called a “hotbed” of corruption.

Senator Shurz in a speech on the Senate Floor in 1871 said that the corruption of the spoils system “insinuates itself like a subtle poison”.

Senator George Hoar who also served during this era would later go on to write “political corruption in high places is the most formidable peril to any Government and, if it be not encountered and overcome, fatal to a Republic.”

Fortunately, it was encountered by an investment in service.

Congress passed the Pendleton Act, which while not perfect, worked to establish a civil service based on merit.

Over the course of the 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.

The challenge of corruption, as then-Senator John F. Kennedy said on the campaign trail in 1960, was “tragic in the public sense”, resulting in “justice denied, taxes wasted...and problems ignored.”

He went onto 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 impulse of those in power. But this is not enough.

Kennedy, three months after his acknowledgement of “crooks and weaklings,” issued a powerful and necessary action to counter corruption: He called on us and said “what you can do for your country.”

**This is my seventh and final principle.**  
**Corruption cannot be countered solely through restraints and containment. Corruption must be overridden by a 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.

If the opposite of democracy is apathy, then the opposite of political 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 look like.

To help build opportunities, I introduced bills that created scholarship programs for students to intern in county and municipal governments – encouraging young people to get involved at the local level of service.

One that expanded opportunities for Americans who served through AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps...

And one that codifies and strengthens the Presidential Management Fellows Program – a program that was instrumental in my service story.

To help build community, I introduced legislation that provided support for programs that help teachers incorporate service into their classrooms.

If passed, it would restart the Learn and Service America program which engaged more than a million students and teachers per year, providing nearly 20 million hours of community service.

I last month introduced a constellation of legislation that would supercharge much needed civics education in this country, using the 250th anniversary of our nation to spark a reflection to pull our country out of the tailspin that we are in and remember who our founding values were.

There is a reason why the first actions of Trump were to fire Inspectors General and to unleash DOGE to demonize and terrorize government workers. There is a reason why OMB director Russell Vought said he wants to “traumatize” public servants and make them wake up each morning feeling like they are the enemy.

It’s because leaders of this administration cannot comprehend that there are people, civil servants, who are simply working to better our country. That idea is so foreign to them. This administration

assumes they are there to push some nefarious agenda, assuming that these public servants are as debased as they are.

To counter this, I and I hope others will work to rebuild our public service corps and work to rebuild the trust from the American people. By making sure that people are always given an opportunity to have their voices heard, we can judge the success of programs by whether they've served people, not whether they serve the ideological whims or financial futures of the well-off and well-connected.

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 this will be an incredible challenge.

But it is a challenge that service not only prepares us to take on, but to succeed.

We have, to quote Judge Katzmann, “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.

To the students listening — I’ve been in your shoes before. I know the decisions ahead of you. Choices to make. Starting salaries to weigh.

My challenge to you tonight is if you share some of what I said tonight about concern over 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, and anti-corruption movement that will fight against the apathy, against the helplessness, against the antibodies of the status quo. We need to restore trust back into our government and ignite a new era of public service in our nation. I humbly ask that you join our movement.

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