

Ways & Means Transcript—S1E5—The Extraordinary Search for Ordinary Politicians

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We spotlight bright ideas for how to improve human society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Jeremy Hachen (JH): I'm Jeremy Hachen. I'm from Concord, North Carolina in Cabarrus County. I'm a public-school teacher, and I'm running for North Carolina General Assembly for November 2016.

EH: Jeremy Hachen made a decision to run for office two years ago. He was standing in a voting booth looking at his ballot.

JH: How can we have just one person running for General Assembly? And I just thought, "Just for the good of democracy, if nothing else, like, there has to be another challenger." So, when I walked out the voting booth, I got in my car and I was like, "You know what? Next year, I'm gonna run against her if nobody else is going to. I'll do it."

EH: After making this snap decision, Jeremy began trying to figure out how to actually do it.

JH: There's no school that you enroll in to be like, "Oh, like, you've never been in politics before and you want to run an insurgent campaign against the eight-term incumbent?" Like, yeah, like, "Just sign up and we'll take care of you." Like, that doesn't exist. The more I talk about it, the more ridiculous this whole plan, this whole process seems.

EH: On this episode of Ways and Means, we follow schoolteacher Jeremy Hachen as he launches his first campaign and discovers, to his surprise, there is actually a school of sorts for wannabe-politicians, and such schools can be an important part of the solution for one of the most vexing issues in politics: How to get more ordinary people to run for office. Jeremy Hachen teaches social studies in a North Carolina high school. He's 24 years old. Parents sometimes mistake him for a student.

JH: Oh, I mean, as a teacher, I get it all the time. I'll have parents come in for open house or for conferences and they're like, "Are you sure, like, you're supposed to be teaching my child stuff?" Like, "Are you lost? Are you a senior?"

EH: Jeremy says his spur-of-the-moment decision to run for office was actually born of some deep frustrations. He wants to fix the problems he sees in his classroom. 9th graders on a 3rd grade reading level, kids who don't have internet access to do homework, kids who miss school to watch brothers and sisters while their moms go to work. Or, as he says-

JH: Death by a thousand cuts.

EH: As a first-time candidate, one of Jeremy's big worries is getting together enough money to launch a campaign. His early estimates were way off.

JH: The person I was talking to, they were, like, throwing back and forth with me. Like, "How much money do you think you need?" I was like, "I don't know, I feel like we could do it for like \$10,000." It turns out that I'm, you know, a hundred percent wrong, or a thousand percent wrong, on my estimate. A hundred thousand is a very intimidating number.

EH: Modern campaigns are really expensive, and rich people have a huge advantage. They start any political race much closer to the finish line.

Nick Carnes (NC): If millionaires formed their own political party, that party would already have a majority of the House of Representatives, a super-majority in the Senate, a majority on the Supreme Court, and a man in the White House.

EH: This is Nick Carnes. He's an assistant professor at Duke University. He wrote a book called "White Collar Government".

NC: If working-class people, people who do manual labor jobs, service industry jobs, if they formed a political party, that party would be a majority of our country, but less than 2% of members of Congress would come from the working-class.

EH: Put another way, millionaires make up about 3% of the U.S. population, but they control all three branches of the federal government. The median wealth for a member of Congress is \$1.1 million. In contrast, the typical American family's wealth totals about \$70,000, and people who have worked in labor and service industry jobs are practically non-existent on Capitol Hill. 51% of Americans work in such jobs, and yet, they make up less than 2% of Congress. Some people think it's fine to have rich people running the country. They believe successful business-people bring that experience into governing.

Donald Trump (DT): I'm really rich. I'll show you that in a second- and, by the way, I'm not even saying that in a brag- that's the kind of mindset, that's the kind of thinking you need for this country.

EH: That's Donald Trump, of course. He's talked a lot about his wealth on the campaign trail. "Wealthy people do bring their experience of being rich into office, but it's not always good for the country," says Nick Carnes. His research shows that government by the rich looks a lot like government for the rich.

NC: It really matters who gets into our political institutions. And so, if we've got Congress making decisions about the minimum wage, and no one in the room has ever worked a minimum wage job that's gonna affect what they do. If we've got Congress making decisions about whether to extend health insurance to people who don't have it, and everyone in the room has had health insurance their entire life, that's gonna affect what they do. When John Boehner was campaigning, he used to always say, "I'm a small business owner at heart, and I bring that perspective to political office," and when politicians say that, they're really telling the truth.

EH: Nick says, "You get different perspective on things when you've done blue-collar work." He knows this not just from his research, but also from personal experience. He once got paid to wear a Tony the Tiger costume for the grand opening of a grocery store.

NC: My parents were two unmarried teenagers with a high school diploma between the two of them when I was born. And I sort of paid my way through high school, college doing manual labor jobs, service industry jobs. So, you know, I know how to hang sheet-rock, I know how to make Cinnabuns- those are the kinds of things I did before I was a professor at a university. And then, when I got into the world of political science, I realized just how big the gap was between politicians and the kinds of people I worked with my whole life before that.

EH: Nick became curious. Does it even matter that in the voting booth, our choice is usually between one millionaire and another millionaire? And, if it does matter, can we actually do anything about it?

NC: And so, I started doing research on the effects of, sort of, government by the rich or white-collar government, and I realized this stuff has major consequences on the big economic issues that our country is facing. It really matters that almost none of our politicians come from the working-class jobs that most Americans do every single day. That made me want to understand what exactly is keeping ordinary Americans from getting into politics.

JH: Hello?

Female Voice: Hi, Jeremy?

JH: Yeah.

EH: Here's our candidate, Jeremy Hachen again. It's been two months since he filed his papers to run for office. Luckily for him, he doesn't have a challenger in the primary for the job he wants: a seat in the North Carolina legislature. So, he's been able to focus totally on getting ready for the November general election. He's still working his day job as a teacher and we caught up with him while he was driving home from coaching the girls' soccer team at his high school. He says it's been hard to fit being a candidate into his already-busy schedule.

JH: I've been invited to a number of interest-group meetings, candidate luncheons, meet-and-greets, that are really all happening during the weekday, during the work day. So, you know, I get all these invitations of things that I would love to go to, but I have to be at work. I have to be at school teaching my kids. I think the last two months, I've really been rocking about 14 to 16-hour days, and that's before I can get through the campaign. So, yeah, for all these political action or political events and meet-and-greets, unless you're retired and independently wealthy, it makes it very difficult for you to be relevant.

EH: By the way, we need to point out that Jeremy isn't technically a blue-collar candidate. He's not working at a manual labor service job. Teaching is a profession, even if it doesn't pay all that well. "But working teachers don't typically run for office and, it's not just money and time that prevents them from doing that," says Nick Carnes. There's another roadblock to elected office for regular people that surprised even him.

NC: One of the main reasons why people don't run for political office is that they aren't asked to.

EH: Did you catch that? They aren't asked to run for office. It seems like such a simple thing, but it's important.

NC: What most people don't know is the candidates who show up on your ballot aren't usually self-starters. They aren't people who woke up one morning and said, "I want to run for office."

EH: Nick says Jeremy Hachen's story about his decision in the voting booth is pretty unusual.

NC: Almost everyone who runs for political office is recruited.

EH: Nick says, "Party leaders recruit people they think will have an easier path to victory." That could be money, or connections. They also recruit among their own circle of friends. In the 1970's, groups began to realize that getting more diverse candidates elected would take focused recruitment. A group called Emily's List, for example, was created to recruit and train women for their first campaigns.

NC: Some organizations are even now starting to identify and recruit and support candidates from lower income or working-class backgrounds. So, in the state of Maine, there's a labor union that runs a training program just for blue-collar workers that helps them run for political office.

Troy Jackson (TR): Hello, fellow Democrats, brothers, and sisters! My name is Troy Jackson, and I'm running for Congress because I believe the middle class needs a voice. I'm running for Congress, because I don't hear enough people in Washington saying the things that I believe need to be said. I stopped accepting things-

EH: That union training program helped transform Troy Jackson, a logger, into Troy Jackson, a successful Maine state legislator. Eventually, Troy Jackson even ran for Congress. There are similar training programs in Nevada, New York, California, Connecticut, Oregon, and New Jersey. Candidates trained by a New Jersey program run by the AFLCIO have won more than eight hundred elections, from school boards to the state legislature.

Female voice 2: So, good morning, and thanks for getting up early on a Saturday to join us. You are in this room today because you're considering this crazy thing of running for office, or potentially helping someone run for office-

EH: One sunny Saturday last fall, Nick Carnes, as part of his research, put on his own candidate training workshop. He wanted to see firsthand how the training works, so we joined forces with a political action group called Lillian's List to organize the workshop. It was not easy. Nick reached out to more than 90 political and nonprofit organizations from across the political spectrum, but he found just 40 people to attend his workshop. Our candidate for the North Carolina House, Jeremy Hachen, was one of them.

NC: I was really blown away by just how much time and energy it takes to do this kind of recruitment effort.

EH: This is Nick Carnes, again.

NC: A lot of people think about elections as, you know, what happens right before the campaign. You see advertisements, you show up at the polls, you pick your candidate, and then they announce the winner. What I've learned of this process is there's a huge amount of work that goes on long before any of that to identify potential candidates, recruit them, train them, and all of that is, I think, just as important as the stuff that goes on in the actual campaign.

EH: Nick's experience helps explain why candidate training courses still aren't all that common, even though they work.

NC: A lot of the organizations that are doing political work in our communities aren't currently doing candidate recruitment as a part of their day-to-day work. A lot of organizations just don't have extra

energy or extra effort on top to also do the very long run work of identifying and recruiting and building up a bench of candidates who can help them advance their agenda, you know, five or ten years from now.

EH: This challenging, long game- it's part of the reason it's hard to get ordinary people interested in running for office, but Nick is optimistic.

NC: We still don't have a governor who was a blue-collar worker when they first got into political office, but the trajectory of these programs is really positive. It looks like, when you identify and support candidates from the working class, they tend to work their way up in the sort of a larger structure of U.S. politics. I think, if we check back in, say, in a decade, you're probably gonna see people reaching to the state and federal level.

EH: There are months to go before November, when our candidate, teacher Jeremy Hachen faces that eight-term incumbent in the general election. It'll be a David and Goliath battle, to be sure. In a nod to his long-shot chance at winning, Jeremy gave his campaign a name. He calls it the "Not a Cakewalk Campaign", but Jeremy's working on his brochures and yard signs, he's got a website, a campaign video, and a Twitter account. He's feeling hopeful.

JH: You know, General Assembly Representative Government- it was designed for regular people to actually represent their community, and not be in there for X amount of years and just have that be their life. I would encourage way more people, if you're thinking about running for political office, get into it, because if you don't, then somebody else will and we might not want that.

EH: We'll tell you if Jeremy wins or not in a future episode.

Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Karen Kemp, and Alison Jones. We had audio help from Jorge Valencia and engineering help from Johnny Vince Evans. If you head to our website, waysandmeansshow.org, you can find more information on Nick Carnes's research, Jeremy Hachen's campaign, and candidate training schools. For the record, Nick Carnes, the Duke assistant professor has been registered as a Republican and a Democrat in the past. He's now unaffiliated. Katherine Zhou does the art for our show. Our assistant producer is Suzanna Roberson. We'd love to hear what you think of our podcast. A listener named David emailed us this, "I just listened to the Ways and Means episode about the sugar fix, and was reminded anew how impressive this podcast is. I've listened to all of the previous stories, as well, generally when I'm working out at the gym, and I found them all to be thoughtful and engaging." Thanks for writing, David. We hope you, too, will take a minute to leave a review at iTunes. It will help other people find our show. We're a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and we thank you so much for listening. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

NC: Sarah Palin? Yeah, she has college degree and runs a multi-million-dollar family business. I don't know why we're talking about Sarah Palin as working-class. Not everyone who hunts is, you know, a blue-collar worker.