

It Mattered! Gerrymander Reform in Michigan

The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 4

Nancy: Three years ago, never in a million years, ever! If you said, “Hey, will you be leading a grassroots political advocacy nonprofit?” Would I have said, “Sure. That that's likely or even possible or... Oh, yeah, I've been preparing for that my whole life--” NO.

Allison: That's Nancy Wang. And to her surprise, she actually *is* leading a grassroots political advocacy nonprofit in Michigan. It's called Voters Not Politicians. And it's fighting for fairer elections. She used to teach law at the University of Michigan. Then, believe it or not, a Facebook post changed the course of her life. Ultimately, it also changed the Michigan state constitution.

Allison: This is The Pledge. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

BREAK

Allison: Katie Fahey wrote that Facebook post. It was pretty straightforward.

Katie: I'd like to take on gerrymandering in Michigan. If you'd like to help, let me know. Smiley face.

Nancy: So then when I saw Katie's Facebook post in 2016,

Allison: That's Nancy again.

Nancy: I thought a couple things--number one, that this really needed to be changed. Michigan was one of the most extremely gerrymandered states in the country. And then, number two, that as a lawyer, I could contribute in a meaningful way because there were all these questions about, well, how would you design a fair redistricting process? And, what are our legal avenues for making change? And that was an area where I could help do that research and help to wrap our heads around what our potential solutions would be.

Allison: So she volunteered. But before I tell you what happened with Voters not Politicians, let me fill you in on what was happening in Michigan that got these women so galvanized. Remember the Flint Water Crisis? That was just the tip of the iceberg.

Allison: Art Reyes III is the Executive Director of We The People, Michigan and a Flint native. As he described it, many people were frustrated with the government. To begin with, they had been part of a rapid and drastic economic decline.

Art: So, you know, we have a community like Flint, for instance, that goes from the 1950s, the highest per capita income city in the country, to today, Flint's the poorest city in America.

Allison: There were many reasons for the steep decline, but Art highlights one policy that deeply hurt many in the state--the Emergency Manager Law. This law allows the Governor to unilaterally declare a municipality or school district to be in financial distress, and to appoint a manager with virtually unchecked authority. In practice, this usually translates into taking over black and brown communities and, Art tells me, harming the communities while profiting outside companies. The law was unpopular with Michiganders, and in 2012 there was a referendum to repeal it.

Art: **It won big. It won in rural areas and suburbs and suburban communities and urban communities. The citizens of the state of Michigan said the emergency management law is undemocratic. We don't want it. They repealed it.**

Allison: But then the legislators defied the voters, defied the will of the people. They responded to that vote by passing a new version of the very same bill. That's how the governor was able to impose an emergency manager in Flint, Michigan. And his decisions ruined the Flint water supply and poisoned thousands of children because of dangerously high levels of lead in the water. The crisis fueled rebellion. Rebellion like the gerrymander reform campaign. Why didn't the politicians listen to the voters, and do away with the Emergency Manager Law? One big reason was that they didn't have to. Their power was protected by the gerrymandered maps.

Art: **So you had had kind of the maps that were not reflective of what, you know, people actually wanted in the state, that were horribly gerrymandered. You just look at the map. And so, you know, this grassroots effort really stepped up to demand that, you know, we change that, that politicians don't get to pick their districts. Voters should pick that.**

Allison: That's what Katie thought when she wrote that Facebook post that inspired Nancy.

Katie: **I wanted to see if there were other people who wanted to work on the system.**

Allison: For Katie, working on the system first meant changing how politicians draw election maps to rig elections and to keep themselves in power.

Katie: **What I saw as one of the root causes of some of the dysfunction and why things like the Flint water crisis can happen and no accountability exists from the elected politicians who made it happen.**

Allison: This message resonated across the state. People wanted change. Here's Nancy.

Nancy: **We needed something huge. We needed big change. But first, we had to really understand, like, what had brought us to where we were in 2016, right? Where we had a state legislature that many people did not feel represented their interests.**

Allison: And so began the effort behind what became Michigan's 2018 Proposal 2 - an initiative to end political gerrymandering of election district maps through a new independent, 13-member citizens redistricting commission. There would be four Republicans, four Democrats, and five people who identify with neither party. The main idea was to prevent any single party from dominating the process.

Nancy: Because I was the attorney in the group, I made a spreadsheet with all of these questions, color coded about like, what do we have now? What do other states have that are better? Could we get there, too, you know, from where we are to where they are? And because I made this spreadsheet, it was like two sheets long. Everyone was like, this is great. You should lead the policy committee.

Allison: I actually love this. Her memory illustrates the groups' genuine humility and earnestness. They were political amateurs. They were honest with themselves about what they didn't know, but they didn't let that stop them.

Nancy: I had one meeting of our group in my living room and, it was like, I had a one-year-old, like, crawling over your head. We didn't get much done. But I do remember looking around that room and us just beaming at each other, being like there was this light bulb where we're like, this is coming together and we are doing this.

Allison: They started hosting town hall meetings throughout the state. They were determined to include people from every region. Here's Katey.

Katie: We knew that when we wanted to write the constitutional language, we wanted it for, by and of the people of Michigan. You know, when you look at redistricting and gerrymandering, one of the problems with it is that it's done behind closed doors by a few people, even though it's a law that impacts 10 years worth of elections.

Allison: This is why you might have noticed the strong push this year to get your 2020 census form in. Census data are used to redraw district maps that last 10 years. If they are drawn unfairly or based on bad data, they can skew the balance of power in the state legislature and congress and mute the power of voters. Katie and Nancy were committed to making sure that this didn't happen again in Michigan.

Katie: And if we were going to be putting something in our Constitution, then it just felt wrong that even if we were smart people at the best of intentions, that it was a small group of us deciding what this constitution language would be. So we wanted to go out and talk to the people of the state.

Allison: And they were true to their word.

Katie: We ended up holding thirty-three town halls in thirty-three days, going to each congressional district at least twice

Allison: Nothing deterred them.

Katie: One of the first ones was in northern Michigan at the very end of February. It was right after one of the first ice storms. And it was standing room only- 70 people in a town that maybe has a population of three thousand.

Allison: By holding all those meetings, they got more and more support. Here's Nancy.

Nancy: Every time we gave a talk we recruited everybody in the audience and everyone just signed up right then and there. And then that was actually our fundraising as well, because we were funded, you know, for the first 18 months of our campaign solely through small grassroots donations that were just basically all of our ourselves, our volunteers, giving small money, like, into the pot

Allison: People who volunteered were ready to work hard.

Nancy: People signed on, like on a full time, you know, volunteer basis, on top of full time jobs and all the other things that come with life.

Allison: They started to get attention from groups like the ACLU and the League of Women Voters.

Nancy: National experts, like, started hearing about us as well. So Michael Li of the Brennan Center reached out....

Allison: The Brennan Center for Justice is a leading national advocate for justice and election law reform.

Nancy: And we were talking back and forth and he shared, um, their studies and their analyses of what some of the elements of independent redistricting should be and all that stuff.

Allison: Michael Li actually ended up helping to facilitate one of Nancy's big policy meetings in person. As we saw in Florida in our last episode, it's really tricky to set up a system that is nonpartisan, and can be sustained, no matter who is in power. Nancy got help from experts to create a robust system that would do just that. She and Katie were determined to break out of the partisan game of red versus blue.

Katie: How truly like game pieces voters are looked at. They're not looked at as people with lives that have school districts that are impacted by your decisions, or water that's impacted by your decisions, or literally job availability that are impacted by your decisions. They are just looked at as either red or blue. Can I trick them into voting for this, even though they might not like it, or can I trick them to voting for that?

Allison: And then...

Nancy: The fact that 2020 and 2021 were right on the horizon. So that also lit a fire in our bellies. Like, we gotta do this.

Allison: The 2018 election would determine how the new maps were drawn. With a new, nonpartisan commission in 2021, they would be fair maps.

Nancy: We were just kind of like, we gotta try and it's gotta be now.

Allison: After the break, we'll find out how they proved that what seems impossible becomes possible, when thousands of people are motivated to make it happen.

BREAK

Allison: Once again, it's time to hear from a listener. I'm sharing messages this season from all of you about what you're doing to take part in this democracy.

Annie: Hi Allison, this is Annie. This week I pledge to distribute a thousand postcards to volunteers who are going to send them to people to encourage them to vote by mail. And I also pledge to spend at least an hour phone banking for the month of September and October. Thanks for your great work. Bye.

Allison: That's so awesome, Annie. It's amazing what you can do if you get your friends in on the action. 1000 postcards! *And* time on the phone. Wow. Now it's your turn. What's one thing you are planning on doing to take action before the election? Leave me a voicemail at 617-663-8668. You can also find that number in the show notes at thepledgepodcast.com.

BREAK

Allison: Back in Michigan, Katie, Nancy, and the many other volunteers got to work. First they had to collect signatures to get their proposal for gerrymander reform on the ballot.

Nancy: We had to collect like you had to collect over three hundred twenty five thousand signatures, And that's a lot of signatures, especially in Michigan, when it's like you don't want to be outside for like six months a year, you know.

Allison: They were able to get ALL those signatures, because they had volunteers everywhere. But the Michigan Supreme Court posed the biggest hurdle. No matter how successful Voters Not Politicians was with grassroots organizing, no one thought they could get approval from the Supreme Court.

Nancy: And in fact a lot of national funders that we talked to just said that we could do what we want, we could have this whole big, great campaign, but that we could never get past the Michigan Supreme Court.

Allison: The Michigan Chamber of Commerce argued that the Voters Not politicians' ballot initiative amounted to a major revision of the state constitution. To make that kind of change, they said, required a constitutional convention. But Voters Not Politicians argued that gerrymandering reform was part of the state constitution. In the end, the court agreed with Voters Not Politicians. With a narrow vote of 4-3, the court said that the existing constitution gives people the power to enact reforms.

Katie: Once we won the Supreme Court case, that's when bigger money came in and then we finally got some multi-million dollar donors who are willing to put that truly on the line because there was a guaranteed pathway to the ballot box.

Allison: They had experienced one success after the next. But each step came with enormous challenges. They were, after all, really new to this political campaign work.

Nancy: It's hard, you know, it's like really hard. It's hard to, like, pour your soul into this. I'd never talked to the media before. But, you know, we would do this stuff that was uncomfortable.

Allison: And they got pushback from established organizations that questioned their strategy.

Nancy: I mean I distinctly, remember coming out of a meeting and sitting in my car and crying and calling my husband. Some people were telling us we were doing the exact wrong thing. And we were, Johnny come lately, right? Like, we were passionate, but we didn't have the relationships in the communities in Michigan, especially communities of color. A lot of the communities that had been most affected by gerrymandering. Right? So we did get pushback by what I would call but not in a derogatory way, like the established nonprofits in Michigan.

Allison: But they kept working on it and eventually those other civic groups joined in. In the end, Voters Not Politicians got a big majority vote from the people of Michigan--61% majority!

Nancy: Oh my God. Oh my God! What a great night for Michigan! Woo!

Katie: We just amended the state constitution to bring fair impartial and transparent redistricting for decades to come! (Cheers)

Allison: And Michigan wasn't the only state that year to successfully fight against gerrymandering.

Hedrick: The year 2018 was the most powerful, productive year for grassroots political reform in America in half a century. We hadn't seen anything like it since the civil rights era of the 1960s.

Allison: That's Hedrick Smith.

Hedrick: Citizen movements pushing for action and winning gerrymander reform in Michigan, Colorado, Missouri, and Utah, forcing the Ohio legislature to adopt a similar reform. And there were movements winning public funding of campaigns in Baltimore, Denver, Phoenix and Portland, Oregon.

Allison: And you know about the voting rights victory in Florida in 2018. We learned about that in Episodes 1 and 2. But of course, like we saw then, winning is just a first step.

Nancy: You know, it was just a couple weeks later where we heard that the legislature was trying to undermine the commission during lame duck.

Allison: That's the independent, redistricting commission that's in the proposal.

Nancy: And so we mobilized our grassroots network, to beat back that bill. And we and we were able to kill it. So that but that was like immediately after the election, we had to, you know, reconvene and and put a plan together and execute.

Allison: And there have been other challenges as well. But they keep winning. So what does Nancy want you to take away from their story?

Nancy: So if you look out in the world and you think there needs to be real fundamental change, at like a really high level, some, some, systemic overhaul of our political system. Like, you can do that, right. Not alone, but you can do that. You can, like, pour yourself into an effort where citizens can actually make that kind of change, both in Michigan and in other states.

Allison: I think that Nancy's story is something many of us can relate to. I know that I can. I mean, I'm producing and hosting a podcast about political engagement. I know it's the third season, and yet it still surprises me. But when you see something that calls to you, sometimes you just act. You just do it. That's what happened to Nancy in 2016, and, it turns out, she was joined by thousands of other Michiganders who were also disenchanting with politics in their state. Katie sums it up in her victory speech.

Katie: It mattered that you showed up. It mattered that you knocked doors. It mattered that you gathered signatures and stood in the rain and the cold and the heat. All of that mattered. It really mattered. For generations of people your sacrifices have changed our Michigan state constitution. The Michigan state constitution opens with, “All political power is inherent in the people. We are those people. This is our power. Let’s go have an independent citizens redistricting commission that restores faith in democracy! Cheers!

Allison: In our next story you'll meet Vanessa Valasquez from Detroit Action. Gerrymandering reform is a crucial first step. Vanessa’s work will make sure that people actually claim the power they’ve gained.

Vanessa: We're here making sure that whatever issue you're facing right now, we can organize around that change and someone isn't facing that same issue 10 years from now.

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