

# A Political Startup

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*“Politics is like the weather: everybody discusses it but nobody actually does anything about it.”*

The golden dome of the Massachusetts State House rises majestically over the grass of Boston Common. The sun glints off the dome while kids play on the grass, but on the State House steps there is nobody except for a couple of my friends — and me, holding a ridiculously-large stack of paper that threatened to blow away in the breeze. “This is what failure looks like,” I thought.

Within half an hour, I found myself standing in the same place, surrounded by TV cameras and microphones on all sides, reporters throwing questions as fast as I could answer them. And the papers hadn’t blown away. How did I get here?

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At the beginning of the year, I cofounded a political action committee, [the Progressive Change Campaign Committee](#). We had no money and no members and not much of a plan for how to get them. We wrote up long proposals for big donors on why they should write us checks, and tried negotiating with electoral candidates on why they should send us members, but neither of these were particularly successful. Then Jon Stewart attacked Jim Cramer.

Cramer came to symbolize the foolishness and vapidness of the media in the face of the financial crisis. His blatantly buffoonish cluelessness (“*Don’t move your money from Bear! That’s just being silly! Don’t be silly!*”) were the epitome of a press that championed the housing bubble and fumbled the crash. We were giddy about the press getting their day in scorn, but we wanted to accomplish positive change as well. So we hit upon the idea of starting a petition to demand CNBC hire someone who was *right* about the housing crisis.

We spread the word to friends and bloggers and before we knew it we had nearly 20,000 signatures — 20,000 new members. It was quite the start.

A couple months later, frustrated that Norm Coleman wouldn’t drop his spurious legal challenges against Al Franken being named a Senator, we started NormDollar.com. We asked people to donate a dollar each day Norm Coleman didn’t drop out of the race, money we’d spend electing progressive candidates. It was featured on *Hardball* and throughout the political press. We also videotaped Norm’s donors’ reactions when we told them about the program. But my

favorite was when we presented Norm with a big novelty check for him to sign, representing all the money he'd raised for progressives.

Now we had money too.

I came back from my month offline to find we were raising money for TV ads — running ads in DC pressuring representatives to support the public health care option, asking whether they'd sold out to their insurance industry campaign contributors. And when Sen. Ben Nelson started a campaign to stall the health care bill, we filmed an ad with Mike Snider. Mike talked plainly to the camera about how, as owner of the local Syzzlyn Skillet, he received a call from his insurers saying they were raising his rates by 42%. "I can't afford that!" he exclaimed. And then to hear his own Senator was trying to prevent health care reform?

Mike was just an average guy who made a real political difference. After we started airing our ad, Ben Nelson's spokesperson tried to denounce him and the Senator himself called Mike and asked to see his health care bills. Mike was a guest on *The Rachel Maddow Show* and his restaurant has become a base of operations for the local political community. Mike's story was so powerful that Ben Nelson was forced to put up his own ads directly responding to it — even though Nelson isn't up for reelection in years — in which he (ridiculously) calls Mike a lying DC politician.

Mike's story really inspired me as to the difference just one person could make, but I never thought that person would be me. When my Senator, Ted Kennedy, passed away, I wanted to honor his memory by fighting for the causes he fought for. His last request had been a letter to the Massachusetts legislature asking them to change the law and let a replacement be appointed to his seat to continue his fight for universal health care. Without the change, the seat would stay vacant for five months while an election could be scheduled — and the next five months will be crucial.

With the rest of the (growing) PCCC team, we came up with a plan to launch a petition asking the legislature to honor that request. We sent out an email asking people to sign and tell their friends. Within a few days, we had 20,000 signatures. I was blown away — clearly people cared.

I'd promised to deliver the signatures on Monday, without really thinking about what that entailed. I called the office of the Senate President and Speaker of the House to ask when I could come by and film a short video of the petitions being dropped off. The President of the Senate's office blew me off, insisting that under no circumstances were cameras allowed in their office and saying that the President simply couldn't meet with me. So we decided to make the delivery something they couldn't ignore.

We emailed our list to ask people in the area to show up on the State House steps at 11am Monday. Then we emailed the press and asked them to get there at 11:15. I stayed up all night the night before, feeding paper into the printer

trying to print out 20,000 names. Then I grabbed a stack and headed to the State House.

The stack — 600 sheets or so — kept trying to fall over and blow away and at the State House there were only a couple friends who were loaning me their camera. We decided to go in and scope out President Murray's office. When we came back, our members started arriving: old ladies with their grandchildren, college students, and everyone in between. The media started pressing closer: a photographer for the *Herald*, a cameraman for Fox. Microphones kept being shoved in my face and people kept asking me to spell my name. I hefted the stack of petitions and kept repeating why I was here.

Local TV news isn't exactly known for its crack reporters, but I have to say I was impressed by Janet Wu. She didn't just ask me the standard questions, but kept pushing me on the hard stuff, barking responses at me, not letting me off the hook. The other reporters smelled blood and joined in. Soon I was at the center of a full scrum of cameras and microphones — surrounded on all sides, every local TV station there. I like to think I comported myself well: I didn't get angry or flustered, I refused to be taken off-message, I kept stressing that this was about doing what the people wanted.

(Later, away from the cameras, Wu was a completely different person. "Hey there, little guy," she cooed at a grandchild. "Hey, it's OK, you can talk to me." Actually, I thought the kid might have the right idea by staying quiet.)

At some point all the cameras dematerialized. "OK, go in," someone said. "Just pretend we're not here." They'd all rematerialized down the street, to film us marching into the capitol, stack of signatures in hand.

Believe it or not, it's not easy to walk into the state capitol holding 600 pieces of paper with TV cameras in front of you and a crowd of supporters behind. I kept wondering where to look and trying not to lose the rest of the crowd. Who knows how that footage came out. And when I got up the steps the reporters dematerialized again and rematerialized inside at the Senate President's office, to film us marching down the hallway. We entered her office and all crowded in — I didn't think we were all going to fit, but we just barely did. The receptionist — in the middle of a phone call — looked a bit flustered. We waited patiently. Soon a broad-shouldered man in a suit came out. "Thanks so much for the petitions," he said, taking them from me. "The proposal will go through the usual process. He turned to head out. I was dumbstruck.

But, bravely, one of the older women spoke up. "Wait," she said. "The normal process? Isn't this a matter of some urgency?" "All I can say is it will go through the usual process." Those women wouldn't let him go. But eventually he did, looking the perfect image of the arrogant unconcerned Boston pol, and Janet Wu stuck a microphone in my face. "Do you feel satisfied?" she asked. I started to speak but she interrupted. "Wait. OK, go again: Do you feel satisfied?"

Outside, a cameraman turned the bright lights on one of the older woman. She was saying, far more clearly and convincingly than me, that no, she wasn't satisfied. That this was an important issue and she wanted to be heard. I was so glad she came.

And then the press and the supporters dematerialized again. I was left, once again, alone with just my friends. We stood in the hallway trying to process what just happened. We caught the man who'd taken the petitions as he was coming out of the office. "So, what is your actual title?" I asked. "Director of Communications," he said.

"And where is the Senate President really?" asked a friend. "Oh, she's in Russia," he explained. "Russia?" "Yeah, she's helping with a nonprofit to assist orphaned children. Pre-scheduled trip. She does it every year." "You're saying she can't meet with us because she's in Russia saving orphans?" I asked. "That's a pretty incredible excuse." We all laughed. He headed off down the hallway.

"Wait, one more thing," a friend called after him. "Where's a good place around here we can get some lunch?"

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Please, [sign our petition](#).