

## Policy 360 – Episode 94 – A Conversation with a Young State Legislator

- Gunther Peck: Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. My name is Gunther Peck, the director of the Heart Leadership program at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. For most high school students, senior year is filled with important events like applying to college, maybe finding a prom date. But, as Jacob Bachmeier entered his senior year at high school, he had one other thing on his mind. Running for political office. In November 2015, Jacob announced his intention to run as a Democrat for a spot in the Montana house of representatives. He wouldn't even be eligible to vote until he turned 18 in January, but because of pre-registration, he was able to run for office.
- Gunther Peck: With a classmate as his manager, Jacob campaigned for the rest of senior year and into his first semester at Montana State University in Northern. In November 2016 Jacob Bachmeier defeated the Republican incumbent, a victory that made him the youngest state legislator in the United States. He won with 53% of the vote. I guess the most important question we want, why at 17 did you decide to run for office?
- Jacob Bachmeier: Yeah, so I think the story starts long before I was in high school. My great grandpa served in the legislator for a long time. He was speaker of the house, and he went on to be on the public service commission. He was mayor of his hometown. He lobbied. I think that influenced the idea that you can make a difference in society by getting involved was something that resonated with me from a young age. I remember watching George Bush give speeches and being interested from a very young age about what people can do to make a difference.
- Jacob Bachmeier: When I was 15, I was working in a grocery store called Gary & Leo's as a bag boy, I took peoples groceries out. One day a state senator came through the line and I recognized him. He was a Democrat. I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to call myself a Democrat at that point in time, but I knew I was leaning that way, and so I asked him some questions and asked if I could take his groceries out. As we went out to the car, out to his truck, he asked me if I could get involved in his campaign.
- Jacob Bachmeier: From there, you know, I volunteered, I knocked doors, I made phone calls, helped him raise money. That's when I knew that politics isn't just something I'm interested in, but rather something I could actually see myself doing.
- Gunther Peck: I just have to ask, what did your parents say when you told them you were going to run while you're still in high school?
- Jacob Bachmeier: When I told my dad he was very excited and he said I should absolutely do it. He thought I could win, so it was really nice to have his support. My mom supported me as well, but I think, you know, talking with my dad, when I told him ... I had talked with some of my political mentors and asked them what they

thought. They gave me the pros and cons to running at such a young age, and when I told my dad what they had to say instantly he said, "Yes, you should do this."

Jacob Bachmeier: Once I had his immediate support that's when I knew I should absolutely do this. I should run for office.

Gunther Peck: What were some of the naysayers saying? Like, what was the argument that you shouldn't run at 17? Just that you would lose, or was there something else?

Jacob Bachmeier: You know, I think it was mostly that people didn't think I could win, and they were worried that if I lost I wouldn't want to run again. They wanted to see me continue to be involved. My thought process was, what's the worst that happens? I lose, I go to college, and I run again someday. You know, why not.

Gunther Peck: I love that. That's a great answer. Okay, we get to the decision, and then we have to actually run a campaign. You had some experience. Who did you pick to be your campaign manager?

Jacob Bachmeier: When I announced my candidacy, I received a check in the mail the next day from one of the college professors at the school I currently go to. Montana law says that if you receive a check you have to file your paperwork with the commissioner of political practices and deposit the check within five days, so the time clock was ticking. At 17 years-old I have this campaign contribution, I am in the hallway after lunch, and I'm looking around in the hallways to see who can I convince to get involved. I pick one of my most conservative, libertarian friends.

Gunther Peck: (Chuckles)

Jacob Bachmeier: I run down the hall and I say, "Daniel, you're 18, I'm 17. I need an 18 year-old to cosign on a bank account with me."

Gunther Peck: Fantastic.

Jacob Bachmeier: He said, "I'll do it, I'll get involved." He was one of my good friends. You know, politically we don't always see eye-to-eye, but he was willing to help me out. For being as conservative as he is, he turned out to be my biggest ally in that campaign.

Gunther Peck: How did he help you? Beyond the obvious fact that he was your campaign manager.

Jacob Bachmeier: Well, so we talked and we worked on a campaign strategy. Tried to recruit a bunch of other young people to get involved. We had a pretty diverse campaign team of probably 10 or 15 people, you know, aged probably 15 to 70 plus. Different backgrounds. Some people who had been involved, some people had

never been involved. As we got to building the team, he was the one that really stuck with me and after school we would research campaign finance reports in Montana. Find out who was donating to other Democrats. We would sit down together, take turns making calls for fundraising. We would go out and knock doors together.

Gunther Peck: It sounds like he was both a collaborator and ... like, you didn't really have a mentor in figuring out how to do this, or were you just kind of, you had done some.

Jacob Bachmeier: I had a mentor who, his name was Greg Jergeson and he's the one I took groceries out for.

Gunther Peck: Okay.

Jacob Bachmeier: He got elected to the state senate when he was 24, he's now in his 70s. I think he has the record for the youngest senator in Montana history. He told me that he would give me advice, but that if I wanted to win I should win on my own merits and not his merits. Then, that would help me build the base I needed to continue to be elected and re-elected.

Gunther Peck: How did you deal with the skepticism I imagine met you when you knocked on a door and you were trying to unseat an incumbent, and you're 17. Maybe if there's one memory you have about a tough persuasion, or a tough citizen?

Jacob Bachmeier: Yeah.

Gunther Peck: What was that like and what happened?

Jacob Bachmeier: I'm very serious about canvassing, and I think that one of the biggest problems with Democrats losing in rural America is that we don't canvas enough. We don't talk to our constituents enough. It was very important to me both as a young person who people didn't really care to hear, to hear people who felt like they haven't been heard. We canvased a lot. I would say the first time that we passed through the district I would knock on a door and they would say, "Are you that 17 year-old, 18 year-old running?" I would say, "Yes I am, does that make a difference in how you cast your vote?"

Gunther Peck: Good question.

Jacob Bachmeier: They would say, "Well, I suppose not." We would move on and I would say, "Well, that's good. What kind of issues are on your heart?" You know, what can-

Gunther Peck: This was your question, what kind of issues are in your heart?

Jacob Bachmeier: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gunther Peck: You asked that open ended question?

Jacob Bachmeier: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gunther Peck: Wow, that's great.

Jacob Bachmeier: Yeah. I think it was important for them to feel like, even if they don't think I'm an authority on an issue, at least I'm willing to listen to what's on their heart and represent them in the legislature.

Gunther Peck: Was anyone mean?

Jacob Bachmeier: You know, I think that I can count the number of times I've had a door slammed in my face on one hand in the three and a half, four years. For the most part people are pretty decent. Maybe it was because I was younger that they were nicer, I don't know. But also, I think that when people think of politicians coming to their door they're worried that they're going to talk and talk and talk. I think what really caught a lot of people off guard when I came to their door was that I was asking questions, and I wanted to get to know them. I wanted to know what they do for a living, I wanted to know what issues are important to their family.

Gunther Peck: What advice would you give to young people elsewhere who are considering running for office?

Jacob Bachmeier: I think that absolutely everybody should be involved in the political process. Whether it's running for office or volunteering on a campaign, or writing a letter to the editor. I think there's a great place for everyone to start. If you're not quite sure if you want to run for office quite yet, volunteer. If you don't quite feel comfortable volunteering be an election judge. You know, there's a place for everyone to start. As you get involved, it can help you decide if you want to continue to get further involved, and volunteering to begin with will help you build the connections you need to run to begin with. I would love to have more young people involved in the legislative process. I think more young people should run for office. But, it is a big decision, and I would recommend that you volunteer on a campaign before you run.

Gunther Peck: At least that. Thank you so much Jacob for joining me and reflecting upon your quite extraordinary story, and also the kind of powerful way you describe it also represent your kind of, I would describe it as a kind of moral voice that you have. That you have found in political engagement and in political running. Which itself is inspiring, whatever party you may belong too. It should give hope to Republicans in Democratic districts as well as Democrats in Republican districts. Jacob Bachmeier represents district 28 in the Montana House of Representatives. He also serves as the chair of the Hill County Democratic Central Committee. Is currently an undergraduate at Montana State University Northern.

Gunther Peck:

Jacob is on the Duke University campus at the request of the Hart Leadership program here at the Sanford School of Public Policy. We'll be back soon with another addition of Policy 360. Until then, I'm Gunther Peck, director of the Hart Leadership program at the Sanford School of Public Policy.