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Profile in Public Integrity: Josh Silver

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Profile in Public Integrity:

Josh Silver Director, Represent.Us



Josh Silver is the director of [Represent.Us](#), a non-profit grassroots organization that advocates for anti-corruption legislation in states and local communities nationwide. Previously, he co-founded and led Free Press, a public interest organization that advocates for media and technology reform. Earlier, Silver served as the campaign manager for the successful Arizona Clean Elections ballot initiative in 1998, and also directed development for the cultural arm of the Smithsonian Institution.

You have a long history pushing for greater transparency in government, starting with the 1998 Arizona Clean Elections ballot initiative. How did your experience in Arizona help shape your career?

Arizona was my first foray into advocating structural reforms—focusing on systemic change that will help public interest-minded politicians win power and advance the interests of the greater good instead of the priorities of moneyed interests. Winning was incredibly empowering: an early-career affirmation that a well-executed political strategy can beat the odds and advance bold reforms thought to be impossible. Arizona turned me into a “structuralist,” my term for public interest advocates focused on changing the policies that shape our key democratic structures: namely, elections, campaign finance, and the media.

You founded Free Press, which had over half a million active members when you stepped down. Do you have any advice for civil society groups about how to reach a wide audience and mobilize a movement?

There are two essential ingredients: First, you must meet people where they are with emotional language that makes them laugh, or get angry or sad. You have to speak to peoples’ heart just as much as their heads. Meet people where they are, and *then* bring them around to your policy solutions. Second, you have to let go of assumptions and use communications methods that get ahead of the curve. When I started Free Press in 2003, email petitions were the way to communicate and gain new volunteers and members. When I started Represent.Us in 2012, social media replaced email. Today, the creation of top-quality multimedia content is essential. And we’re constantly looking around the next corner to figure out the next trend and opportunity. Don’t stop innovating.

Represent.Us is a grassroots campaign that galvanizes local support for anti-corruption legislation. What are the benefits of advocating for change at the local and state level, rather than at the federal level?

Structural reform is currently dead on arrival in Washington—except for occasional symbolic or loophole-riddled minor reforms. The only hope we have is to follow the footsteps of leaders on other issues who took the fight local. Through statewide ballot initiatives, we can put an end to corruption, create more competitive elections, and increase voter participation with our members and ally organizations—no politicians required.

Once enacted, our statewide initiatives will inspire other states to do the same. They will start a “new normal,” where strong ethics and campaign finance laws, competitive legislative races, innovative voting systems that encourage (rather than discourage) a diverse field of candidates, and higher voter participation are a given, not the

exception to the rule. The initiatives will foster a new breed of public servants who will improve the public's perception of government officials and inspire a future generation of leaders. By changing state law, we can transform the political culture of the United States.

Your organization has developed a model policy called “The American Anti-Corruption Act.” Which reforms are included in the Act, and how would they address corruption issues nationwide?

The American Anti-Corruption Act is a model policy that, if enacted, would put voters back at the heart of our nation's political system. The Act does three things:

1. Stop political bribery. The Act prevents lobbyists from donating to legislators and giving them gifts. It closes the revolving door between government service and the lobbying industry. It redefines lobbying so that everyone in the influence industry must register. It makes politics more like sports, where it's against the rules to bribe the umpire.
2. End secret money, so people know who's buying political power. The Act makes donations to politically active 501(c) organizations transparent. This isn't a difficult fix; it's as simple as changing the law. Easy.
3. Give voters a stronger voice by changing how elections are funded. If you don't change the economics of elections, you don't change elections. We have to end the “dependence corruption” created by politicians being forced to ask moneyed interests for donations. Creating public policy that fosters small-dollar contributions from actual constituents is an important piece of the reform puzzle.

When a Represent.Us member initiates a campaign in the city or state where they live, we work closely with them to tailor the Act and develop specific solutions to solve the unique problems and legal parameters of their community.

What opposition has your movement faced and how have you won over opponents?

It's funny—it's almost impossible to find a regular person out there, conservative or progressive, who doesn't support our effort. And it's almost impossible to find a special interest that is thriving in the current system who *does* support it. Those who benefit from the status quo will pull out the stops to keep the political system the way it is. They don't want the other 99.95% of us (the percentage that can't write huge checks to political campaigns) to have a real say over who gets elected and which laws are passed. Fortunately, because of our focus on passing initiatives at the ballot, where people can vote on them directly, we don't need the support of lobbyists, politicians, and political establishment folks to win. We get to focus on connecting with regular people. It's empowering, exciting, and a big relief—how democracy should be.

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Many Americans have become increasingly jaded about government corruption. Can you point to any bright spots or success stories in the public integrity landscape that give you hope for future progress?

Public awareness of legalized corruption hasn't been this high since the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. Americans get that the system is broken and corrupted and we simply must fix it. It's an incredible time to be a structuralist.

A series of recent wins are cause for tremendous optimism. In 2014, an inspiring coalition of conservative and progressive Represent.Us members in Tallahassee put an anti-corruption initiative on the ballot. They had no budget for paid advertising or marketing, but it didn't matter. On Election Day, they won by an overwhelming 2-to-1 margin, creating a new independent ethics commission and officer, lowering campaign contribution limits, and creating a small-donor system to foster small-dollar contributions.

One year later, impressive coalitions passed similar laws in Maine and Seattle—and nonbinding anti-corruption resolutions passed in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Illinois, and other locales. And this fall, voters in South Dakota and Washington State will vote on some of the most comprehensive anti-corruption initiatives our nation has seen.

The people are angry at the establishment and ready to embrace major systemic reforms. While Washington, DC, remains gridlocked and polarized, the American people are ready to work together to fix our broken political system. Grassroots progressives *and* conservatives are united on both their disgust with the status quo and their support of bold reforms like ours. It's the most exciting part of our campaign and a cause for huge optimism.

Our job as leaders is to channel that unity in support of smart political strategies that work. If we fail, so will the great democratic experiment we call the United States of America. The stakes are that high.