



S3 E1: Congressman Ted Lieu, Published May 28, 2018

Aimee: Welcome to Democracy in Color, the voice of the new American majority. I'm your host, Aimee Allison, and with me now is Tim Molina, our political insider. He's our go-to person for stats, analysis, on-the-ground intel and so much more. Tim's the political director of Courage Campaign, coming from the big blue, California. Hey Tim.

Tim: Hey, be glad to be here.

New Speaker: We're going to be talking with Congressman Ted Lieu of California. We're here in Los Angeles. Congressman Lieu made a name for himself by going head to head with Trump on Twitter and now he's a co-chair of the campaign arm of the Congressional Campaign Committee of the Democratic Party.

Aimee: Thanks for joining us, congressman.

Lieu: Thank you Aimee and Tim. Honored to be on the podcast,

Aimee: You are vice chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. So you're a big-time Democrat, leader of Democrats. What is that role, and what do you do in terms of the overall Democratic Party?

Lieu: I have a singular mission which is to flip the House this November. We have to flip 24 seats to take back the majority. Across America, there are 23 seats were Hillary Clinton won that district in the presidential election. There's additional nine that Barack Obama won twice. So in over 30-some districts, the Democratic candidate starts out either ahead or even with a Republican candidate. That's an amazing place to start. We're now targeting a hundred and one congressional districts. You might think that's crazy. Initially I thought, Huh, that seems really quite high, but then you see what happened last November. We swept Virginia. We won the governorship in New Jersey. We flipped the State House back in Washington state.

We won three state seats in the red state of Georgia. We won a seat in the red state of Oklahoma. And then this year, you look at the special elections we won, amazing differentials in Kentucky. We won a seat that Trump won by nearly 50 points and our candidate won by 30-some points for a differential of 86 points. I don't think that's ever happened in US history. We flipped a rural state Senate seat in Wisconsin by over 25 points. So when you look at that, then you're like, Huh, maybe 101 seats is not so crazy that we're targeting in November.

Aimee: Let's talk about California. I mean, Tim, you do a lot of work in California. We're looking at those congressional seats here.

Tim: Yeah, absolutely. In California and to some folks as ground zero for that strategy to take back the House because of the dozens of seats you mentioned. We have seven here that Hillary won. You know, we haven't been able to crack those races for a state like California, you know, it's like a deep blue, blue ribbon state. What is a strategy for states like that, where we have these really important races? How are we going to win those races where we haven't been in the past had been successful in flipping those seats. But Hillary was.

Lieu: The DCCC did something that we never did before. We moved the entire Western Region Office from Washington DC to Irvine, California, and we want to make sure that we have a very strong presence. Five of their seats in California that Hillary Clinton won in the presidential race are in Southern California and four of them are in Orange County, but we're actually targeting an additional two more because the incumbents are clowns.

Aimee: Say their names. I want to hear their names.

Lieu: Devin Nunez.

Aimee: Oh yeah, the one that authored that memo.

Lieu: Correct. And also we're targeting Duncan Hunter in San Diego. He's under investigation for misusing his campaign funds on personal expenses, essentially. Turns out when you're under FBI investigation the voters don't like you very much anymore. So we're actually targeting nine seats. And I just met, uh recently, an amazing candidate, Marge Doyle, who is running against Paul Cook and that is a seat where it's a sort of a plus eight Republican advantage, but she's a registered nurse. She supports single payer, she's progressive, she's done amazingly well. And if we can flip seats and Kentucky and rural Wisconsin then really any seat in California is up for grabs. And so we're going to be looking at that seat as well.

Aimee: This is your stomping ground. What do you think is going to be the secret sauce to flipping the seats? If Hillary Clinton won the district, why do we still have these Trumpettes in Congress representing the people in those areas?

Tim: That is a great question and there's two answers. One is last election cycle for a lot of these districts we just really didn't pay very much attention to, so not only did we not have a tier one candidate, we didn't really have a tier two candidate. We actually have the reverse problem now. We have unbelievable incredible candidates running and all these districts, so there's going to be some messy primaries, but at the end of the day, you don't have a very strong Democrat going into the general election. So that's different. And second, in a presidential election, all their media and energy is basically focused on the two presidential campaigns. Hard for local challengers to get the message across. You won't have that in November. We could actually run over a hundred unique congressional races if we have the resources. So there are challenges, for example, in Dana Rohrabacher, the district, uh, along the coast is going to be talking

about the environment in a way that our Democratic candidate in Kentucky is likely not going to. And that's okay. They have different local issues and when you focus on local issues, their challenges often do much better.

Aimee: You're only one of six immigrants serving in Congress.

Lieu: I am. It's surprisingly few how many immigrants are in Congress. Correct.

Aimee: How does that impact your leadership?

Lieu: Well, it has to do with how we view immigration issues. And what's really concerning to me is not only are the Trump administration's policies xenophobic, really harmful to immigrants, but their whole narrative is false. So if you look at immigration as a whole, immigrants actually commit less crimes than native born Americans. Immigrants or many of them have amazing energy, entrepreneurial skills. A study came out saying 40 percent of fortune 500 companies were started by immigrants or their children. So the entire narrative coming out of the White House is simply not supported by the facts. And as an immigrant myself, it's also very clear that one of the things that has made America great is our immigration. Uh, if you look at countries that don't have immigration, they tend to stagnate. The reason America continues to do well is we keep reenergizing and having new people come in, providing their fresh ideas and their energies, and that's what keeps America strong and prosperous.

Aimee: Before we get back into our conversation with Congressman Ted Lieu, let's take a step back and see how all this fits into the bigger election picture this year. Tim Molina, political director of Courage Campaign as well as our political insider, is here to help break down the progressive political strategies and numbers. So what stood out from the conversation with the congressman so far?

Tim: The big theme here is really what's going to be key to take back the House in this next election and the role that California is going to play. Him being from our home state for folks that are here in California.

Aimee: Right? It's major, right? California is major part of...

Tim: It's huge. California's been said to be ground zero for taking back the House in this next election and we have something like seven out of the 23 races, Congressional races, where Hillary won, but it's currently being occupied by a Republican congressman.

Speaker 3: How's that shaping up?

Tim: It's crazy. I can say in California we've got some really tricky dynamics. In some cases, well, California has a, it's, we already have a headache which is called a Top Two Primary System. The two candidates in a race, regardless of political party, run again, run up against each other in the general. Whoever gets the most votes...

Aimee: Right, so you could have two Democrats to Republicans facing each other and they're the only two that appear on the ballot.

Tim: Yeah, and what we're going to be seeing or what's more likely to happen in these congressional races, these key congressional races in California, it's potentially to Republicans going against each other and the general.

Aimee: Wait, what?

Tim: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. Well, because in some of these races, especially like there's a big race in Orange County and a big race in San Diego, where there was two Republican Congress members, Ed Royce and Darryl Iso. They're longstanding Republican Congress.

Aimee: They're really bad Republicans.

Tim: Yes, as folks might know, Ed Royce was like a hate-rally sympathizer and ISIS. We have a long record of hateful things he's done and said. But both of them said they're not running for reelection. Now, Democrats have several people running in both those races that could split the democratic vote and Republicans have all rallied around one or two candidates that could take the primary.

Aimee: How does race figure into all this?

Tim: I got to say a lot of the frontrunners for either party are white, but in a lot of these races there's tons of people of color that are reshaping the district, registered to vote. In some of these races and the key ones could win the race for Democrats outright.

Aimee: What is the party doing not doing? Because if there's a lot of Democrats running against each other and they don't have a coherent, cohesive strategy to get to Democrats as a top two for the general.

Tim: Well, I think it will be key for Democrats is two things. Turnout. I know that sounds pretty simple, but it's huge. If Democrats can turn out in the numbers they need to, they don't have to worry about the top primary system and then when they go up in general, hopefully they'll have a better chance. The second thing is they need to have a positive and uplifting message. A lot of these key races where Democrats are trying to win and flip the seat, you know, take it from Republicans, people are feeling not like strong ties to certain parties with a lot of undecided voters, right? They may not be feeling strong with the Democratic Party. They may not be feeling inspired by...

Aimee: A significant number of new registrants in California, about a third, are saying they decline to state. They're not identifying with any party. So that's the thing.

Tim: That's a huge thing. We have volunteers that are knocking on doors and they'd go up there and say, hey, we gotta get this Republican out of office, and they close the door because I say, well, what are you with the Democrats? I don't trust either of them. We are also seeing a polling that people are, you know, huge number of people or do not approve of the president's agenda or the GOP agenda, they're very unhappy about what's been done or been trying to get done around health care, around taxes. So these are folks in all of these key districts who they want to see change, you know, they care about all these issues and the Democrats are gonna need to connect with them on that.

Aimee: Let's keep working on. And of course, Tim, always good to hear your insights. In a moment, we'll get back to the second part of our interview with Congressman Ted Lieu.

Aimee: I'm to going to be honest with you about my conversations with not only leaders in the Democratic Party, but those who run organizations that fund campaigns on the progressive side. There seems to not be a full understanding of who is the base. 47 percent of the Democratic Party are people of Color nationally. 24 percent African-American, huge percentage of black women that are the absolute most loyal Democrats White men and white women are majority Republican and have been for most presidential elections. So having said that, a preponderance of money, I'm on my soapbox now, Congressman, so forgive me. Preponderance of money is being spent on TV ads and campaigns aimed at swing voters. I don't understand that. I don't understand it in California, and your colleague Mark Tucano's race, a Congressman in southern California, he ran in a district that was run by Republicans. He focused on turning out voters of color and he won and now he's a progressive voice in the chamber. How do we do that more? I want to do that more.

Lieu: In a lot of these districts in California that's exactly what we're going to do: turn out our base. And if we do that, we win. We don't have to sit there and try to, you know, get the Trump voter to, to sort of vote for Democratic candidates.

Aimee: Which, by the way, they're not going to.

Lieu: That's correct. It's hard, very hard to do that. And so that's why I've been focused on trying to energize the base. And also when folks look at Democrats, I think they want to know that they're fighting. Right. They're fighting for these progressive values, which is why I think what leader Pelosi did for over eight hours was incredible.

Aimee: It's also what you're doing. I mean, all I do, my Twitter game is so weak. All I do is retweet your tweets because I'm like, okay, he what he said he's got it. But I think it matters having strong voice. I wish there were more Ted Lieus in Congress.

Lieu: That's very kind. Uh, that does raise an interesting question. I don't really know why you don't have hundreds and hundreds of Democrats yelling from the rooftops that this is not normal. And not only that, this is insane, and we need to do everything we can to, to reverse the direction of this country. I, I, I'm not sure why you don't see a lot more people just yelling and screaming. It is odd to me. I don't quite get that.

Tim: I mean, that's the big question for me. You've used the word that resonates with me is energized, right? It's one thing to say, we need to turn out our base and people of color, but what is it that's going to get them to feel like their vote counts? With Courage Campaign or Progressives in California, we've been trying to figure out how can we make people's voice feel like it counts? Because right now people feel hopeless. I did a small poll in your district, by the way, I talked to my dad at dinner last night. They live in the beautiful city of Torrance and your district. You know, I just, I had a conversation with him. I said, hey, big elections coming up. He goes, Oh yeah, well, you know, I remember what happened last election. And he just felt so deflated. And I said, well, pops what was, and he's a lifelong Democrat. He's a working class man. He's been union for 30 years and my mom's the same way, lifelong Democrat. I asked him, I said, well,

when was the last time you felt truly inspired by your party? And he said, well, you know, there were some good years during Obama's presidency. He said, but Bobby Kennedy, I think Bobby Kennedy was like the one one guy can look back and say, yeah, he was the man of the people. He was the one that he wasn't shouting from the rooftops, he was just speaking truth to the people.

Aimee: That's a throwback. Bobby Kennedy. That's a long time ago. Are we going to see this kind of moral leadership emerging from Democrats that we haven't seen really by and large, I mean there yourself accepted and a few others, since those times...

Lieu: That's a great point. I think because of really how depraved our president is, it is an opportunity for Democrats to really claim the moral high ground. And there's no reason that we can't talk about morality. It's sort of interesting. I think Republicans are much easier. They would just talk about morality all the time. If for whatever reason the Democrats seem to shy away from that and I don't think there's a good reason and do that and I think this is a great opportunity to not only point out their flaws and our president really to say, look, we're here fighting just for common decency.

Aimee: Do you follow the congressman on Twitter?

Tim: Yeah. Who doesn't. It's a joy, but it's also like on point and so many times it's like, yes, exactly what we're thinking, but yeah, I just curious like we all respond to that as activists in progress as we see them, but yeah. Yeah, exactly. But how has that response, how has the elsmen responses a member of Congress, you know, your, your approach on social media and that accountability that you bring with social media and what's happening.

Lieu: Thanks for that question. I didn't run for Congress to resist the president. In 2016, after president elections, I issued a public statement that basically when something like this, which is one of the great things about America is our peaceful transfer of power. Donald Trump won the electoral college. We should try to work with them, give them a chance to govern. Two months later I concluded he was a totally different and that I was wrong. And it's one of reason I boycotted his relatively small inauguration and it's not because we disagree on policy issues. It's because he was systematically attacking the institutions of our democracy. He was going after the First Amendment and the free press. He was attacking the legitimacy of the judiciary. He was stifling internal dissent and then he was lying at a rate I've never seen a human being lie.

Aimee: Like in a day.

Lieu: In a single day. The Washington Post has done a series of articles where they track everything he says and at the end of the year he's made over 2100 false and misleading statements and to me that is so dangerous. That's a danger to the republic and that's why I resist him. I try to hold him accountable on Twitter. I also do think that humor and satire can reveal truth in a way that other forums sometimes cannot.

Aimee: So much is evolving about the investigation, about Russia's interference in the elections of 2016. I know that you've been very active on social media, but social media is also part of the problem, isn't it? How do we think about what's evolving with the investigation?

Lieu: So let's talk about the point of social media. It is a difficult problem. I do support legislation that will require disclosure of who paid for the ads. So for example, if you watch TV and a television ad comes up, uh, about a federal candidate, at some point you're going to hear the words, you know, I'm Mary Jane and I approve this ad. You don't have to do that with Facebook ads or other social media ads. So I'm supporting legislation that will require a similar disclosure so you'll know it's being paid for by the NRA or paid for by Russia or whatever it is. I think that it'd be helpful too to let the American public know.

I think something else that had happened is people were caught off guard in 2016 and people are still reacting to the Internet. It's still relatively somewhat new and social media is still somewhat new and I think people are more aware now that just because they read a post and a Facebook doesn't mean it's true. And I think just educating people that there is this adversary of ours, Russia, that's trying to put out all sorts of posts that are false and I think more and more he'll be beginning to realize that. And it's also causing an interesting spike in subscriptions to newspaper outlets like the New York Times and Washington Post and so on because now there's a hunger for the public to go, okay, let's go to some organization where we know there is some level of credibility and they know that if they read an article New York Times, it's not going to be about pizzagate. There's going to be some credibility is going to be, you know, more than one source and there's going to be editing and so on, and I think the American public has slowly learning to deal with this deluge of information that we all get much of which may not be true.

Aimee: Hi, I'm Aimee Allison, host of the podcast Democracy in Color, the Voice of the new American majority. Join our conversations with today's best and brightest political leaders, strategists and thinkers. Our mission: to take our country back with the power of progressives of every race and we invite you to join us. To learn more, visit democracyincolor.com or follow us on Twitter at @democracycolor.

Aimee: Okay, I can only say as a private citizen what it's like to look at Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, and try to keep up with the daily deluge of bad news that's coming from DC. How are you supposed to govern? How do you approach governance with such an unpredictable, dangerous president?

Lieu: This is the only administration I know where you have breaking news that gets preempted by breaking news and it is to me sometimes shocking to see the level of incompetence or corruption that you see come out. If you look at Trump's cabinet secretaries, nearly half are either under investigation or had really bad articles written about them for spending money on taxpayers' dime when they shouldn't have. Flying first class when they shouldn't have. Taking trips when they shouldn't have. All sorts of things that you never saw it happen under President Obama. And then the president himself will say crazy things and things are false, misleading. It's all very distressing. So I learned to smile a lot and then to fight back and to do what we can do to stop harmful policies from actually getting enacted.

Aimee: I'm thinking about the tragedy, the shooting 17 people killed at Parkland High School in Florida. What do you think is the congressional response to that tragedy? Do you really

think the movement that the young people look, you know they're leading is going to actually help to change public?

Lieu: I do. I think we are at an inflection point in terms of gun safety measures. Uh, so we already had the White House do two things that for a long time they weren't doing very much on. One is there is now a directive to go ahead and ban bump stocks. Hopefully that will complete the process and we'll get a ban out of that, so we'll. We'll see what the ultimate regulation or directive looks like, but that is a good start. There's also support from the White House to strengthened background checks, so let's take a look at what that actually looks like. But these are things that weren't really happening before this last shooting in Florida. There was a difference. After Newtown you didn't have very little kids inform Americans about what happened, what they were they witnessing, but we have that now where you have students, high school students able to describe their experiences in great detail. Some of them had also filmed what it was like to be in that shooting and I think that's affecting Americans in a way never before. And that's causing change.

Aimee: Yeah, but how do you prioritize? There's so many. Nuclear war with North Korea. Climate change. The way that DACA recipients now are not protected from deportation, and we could go on and on.

Tim: Everything feels like it's on fire. So at this time it's like, what do you wake up in the morning? Well, today, which one am I going to take on? Right? What does that look?

Lieu: So I actually have prioritized nuclear war because that is an existential threat to the United States. So I introduced a bill with Senator Ed Markey and the bill was very simple. The president cannot launch a nuclear first strike without first getting congressional approval and our view is it's a constitutional issue. So if you look at our current launch approval process: for nuclear missiles to launch, you need the national command authority to approve and that sounds really impressive until you look into it. It's just two people. It's the president and his political appointee, the secretary of defense, and under the law, the secretary defense can't not follow that order.

So basically what would happen is Donald Trump would wake up one day and go, oh, I'm really angry. I want to launch the nuclear missiles. Secondary fence gets the order and he executes it, order it goes down the chain of command and missiles launch. It is that easy and our view is that the framers of the Constitution never would have allowed that to happen. They put in incredible checks and balances on the president. They created an entire judiciary to stop the president, an entire legislative branch to be a check and balance on the president, and then they gave the greatest power they knew at that time, the power to declare war, to Congress. There was no way they would let one person launch thousands of nuclear missiles that can kill hundreds of millions of people in less than an hour and not have called that war.

Aimee: What do you want us to know about what is really happening in DC that hasn't really gotten enough attention?

Lieu: I think the Democrats are trying to fight back as hard as we can, but what really matters is public sentiment and I want people to understand the power they have to help shape that. So I remember being really sad election night, all the way till January 20th, and

then on January 21st I saw these amazing women's marches across America and that changed everything and I thought, Huh, that's the America I know and there's more of us. And my very next thought was we're flipping the house and I remember people, you know, last year going, well, is this going to burn out? Are people going to get tired, um, is this going to fizzle? And now we all realize that that was a wrong question they were asking. The real question was how big can they get?

So if you look at this year's women's marches, at some places even larger, Austin, Texas had the largest march ever of any kind in their history. So you see the resistance actually growing bigger and it matters. Public sentiment I think is something that influences all elected officials regardless of party. And I think Lincoln had it right when he said "Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed." And so showing up to rallies, protests, marches, makes a huge difference. Going to congressional town halls, doing a social media post. If you do something on twitter or facebook or Instagram, maybe you can affect a voter in Florida or Ohio or California that lives nowhere near you and change some hearts and minds and I want people to understand the power they have to help shape public opinion.

Aimee: Thank you so much, Congressman Lieu for coming in and speaking with us today. Keep fighting the fight and we appreciate you.

Lieu: Thank you so much.

Aimee: That's it for this episode of Democracy in Color. Big thanks to Tim Molina and the Courage Campaign. Our editor is Chiquita Paschal. Our producer is Paola Mardo, with administrative support by Lyvonne Briggs. Our theme song is "Truckee, CA" by Otis McDonald. Democracy in Color is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. If you appreciate this show as much as we appreciate you, please subscribe wherever you get your podcast and rate us on Apple Podcast. We're also on Facebook and on Twitter. Tell your friends, your colleagues and your neighbors to tune in for their dose of political intelligence. So until next time, thanks for listening.

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