



POLICY ON PURPOSE

Episode 16: Royce Brooks, Executive Director of Annie's List

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ANGELA EVANS: Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans, and I'm the dean of the LBJ School, and I'm so pleased to welcome today my special guest Royce Brooks, who's the director of [Annie's List](#). And I also want to thank everybody for continuing to listen to our podcast "Policy on Purpose." So welcome. I am so pleased that you're with us today. And can I call you Royce?

ROYCE BROOKS: Please do. And thank you for having me. This is really exciting.

EVANS: Well, when I was reading up about you, and I knew you were coming to visit the school, I was amazed at the breadth of your experience in terms of the various levels of government that you've had experience in. And not only the government, but across sectors. So, you've had nonprofit, and then you've had think tank, and then you've been working on mayoral candidacies.

BROOKS: Yes.

EVANS: And you've been working with Wendy Davis on the gubernatorial candidacy. And now with all of this — it's just like an amazing rap. You're just an incredible package of information and experience in terms of trying to get women to vote and understanding the kinds of complexities that are involved in a political campaign, a political system, creating a platform, going and trying to garner support — both in terms of dollar support, but in terms of people voting for you. So, I know Annie's List has been — it's very lucky to have you as the executive director. And I know this is a big part of what you do.

So, what I'd like to talk about today is just have you talk to us about what your experiences have shown you consistently as being the challenges for women when they're trying to get in office, whether it's the state, local or federal level.

BROOKS: Mm-hmm. Well, first of all, thank you for identifying my career as an impressive breadth of experience. I think my parents for a while were wondering, "Why does she have so many different jobs every couple of years?" *[Laughing]*

EVANS: No, but it's wonderful. It's a very rich, robust background that you have in this.

BROOKS: It has been really exciting. And I think most of my career really has been in policy roles, and this Annie's List role is more of a hard political role. And it also feels like really the culmination of so many things that I have cared about over time. I have come to observe in various policy opportunities that you can make a difference marginally, right? You can help implement a new policy, you can sort of help design a new program if you are lucky. If you are less lucky, maybe you're just defending against some bad things. But if you really want a chance at helping to make systemic change, you have to change who holds power. And so that's really where the electoral part connects with the larger progressive project, and really Texas and the — America and the world that we're trying to build.

Annie's List was founded 15 years ago to help recruit and train and elect women to office. And it was founded really because there are barriers to entry for women seeking to run. There are different ways that women make the decision to run from men. You know, research sort of shows this. Men tend to run "ambitionally." They look inside their own soul and decide, you know, this is what I want to do. And women tend to use a more relational model for deciding whether to run. Meaning that they look outside themselves. They look at their family obligations, their community obligations, their work obligations, their networks, and in a way sort of start from a premise of almost talking themselves out of running. Women also tend to be less frequently recruited or sort of asked, "Have you thought about running?" And that — it starts all the way back in childhood, right?

EVANS: Are you seeing a difference though, now? Are you seeing with the newer generation that — are those holding? Are those characteristics holding? Are you starting to see maybe a third reason, which is — I have to get in because I have to still consider my family and my networks and my community and my obligations, but it's a must because what I see around me is just not what I really want our children to go into.

BROOKS: Well yeah, absolutely. And that's —

EVANS: So, I'm just wondering if you're seeing in your own way a shift —

BROOKS: And that's exactly right — that once women sort of traditionally have gone down the list of reasons why they might not run, in the end they are running because they have to. Because they feel really compelled. And in this moment in particular, we're seeing so many

women who really just feel like they have to be in the game. And so, we've seen record numbers of women approaching us. I know our allies have seen the same. During the most recent electoral cycle, we actually trained more than a thousand women how to run, which is a record for us, and I think really is indicative of what I hope is a lasting trend.

EVANS: You know, I think some people also don't think about the *[inaudible]* consequence of this, is that women who go through the training in Annie's List form a network in and of themselves. You know, being together and supporting each other —

BROOKS: Yes.

EVANS: —as running candidates. That this is —they have a network to go to. And I think that's really an important consequence of being part of Annie's List. It's a good consequence.

BROOKS: Absolutely. And we see that. We see our candidates sort of forming circles with each other. Our former — we train not only people who are looking to potentially run, but also people who are looking to serve on campaign staff, and we've seen our staff trainees, our campaign school participants sort of form their own really close networks with each other. Even our interns stay in touch with each other and kind of have a fun time. So, you know, people like to talk about the progressive infrastructure, or lack thereof, here in Texas. And I really like to think of the people that Annie's List has touched, the candidates we've helped to run, the people we've helped to elect, the women we've trained, the interns we've had, the donor base we have, as sort of a shadow progressive infrastructure for this state.

EVANS: Mm-hmm. Well, one of the things I was thinking about too when we were — when I was thinking about what to ask you and what the folks who are listening to this might be thinking about, is when people expect when women are running that their platform is going to be very social, you know, socially oriented, rather than economic, or international, or whatever. But they're going to have to run on all of those. So, do you see part of what your role is, is to get them comfortable talking in these different areas, or using those areas as — giving them more strength to talk about those areas, where people who are in the electorate are going to see them as an international leader, or you know, like an economic leader rather than it's going to be family issues only? I think sometimes we tend to categorize women as being like, "Oh well, they're going to have the soft issues, and they're not going to be able to deal with the hard issues." So talk to us a little bit about how you balance those for the women who come to you.

BROOKS: Sure. So, I think for us it's less about the issues and getting the women — sort of helping them build expertise in those issues, and instead helping them to present their best and most authoritative selves, and really be seen as the leaders that they are. A woman who raises her hand and decides to run for office, and a man who raises his hand and says he wants to run — there's no logical reason why one might expect the man to have some sort of brilliant expertise in international affairs that the woman doesn't have, right? But people tend to listen to men in a different way. So one of the trainings that we actually provide for our endorsed candidates is sort of executive presence, coaching, media training — those kinds of things that

can help someone to feel comfortable speaking with authority and presenting themselves as a real leader.

EVANS: Mm-hmm. I think that's really important, because I think in many cases, the expectation — there's a fear. I mean, you're going to go out, and you're going to be out there, and everything that you are is going to be public. And how are you going to handle that? And so, having some experience to say, No. 1, you're going to experience this. No. 2, you won't be the first or the last person to experience it. And here are some tools that you can use to keep this very — you know, so you protect your own psyche and person, but at the same time you project that. I think that's a very important thing for any candidate, but particularly for women, you know? Because I see a difference in the graduate students here. The difference between the way women approach an issue and the way the young men approach — there just is. I mean, I can't categorize it as like — and generalize it —

[Cross talk]

BROOKS: --women are like this, and men are like this. (laughing)

ANGELA EVANS: No, but there's a fundamental — the way they think. And it's wonderful, the way they think. So, it's just celebrating that, and how you take that wonderful gift and move it into an environment that hasn't always been friendly to those kinds of approaches, I think is really an important aspect of preparing women.

BROOKS: Absolutely.

EVANS: So I had another question, though. And this is a question that comes back to me. I was part of Leadership America many, many years ago, and it started in Texas by women who wanted to grow leaders in Texas, and it grew nationally. And I was in the first national class. And Ann Richards came to speak to us. And one of the things that she said that just always stuck with me — she said, you know, women don't support women. And they don't support them in a way financially. So, she asked all of us, she says, "How many of you bought a new pair of shoes in the last six months?" So, you know, raised her hand. She says, "Why don't you take that money and contribute?"

BROOKS: I love it. I'm going to use that at our fundraisers.

EVANS: *[Laughing]* Because you know, you don't think about as a contributor, as somebody who's contributing to a campaign for women — that's a very important part of women supporting women. So I thought that was an interesting perspective that she had, that women tend not to do that. They tend not to get into the political stream from a financial perspective. So have you seen more of that from actual donors, and you know, women actually stepping up and trying to contribute to this?

BROOKS: Absolutely. Well, and Annie's List really started as a donor circle of women, which made it unique in this space 15 years ago. You know, women were really kind of not stepping up in these kinds of numbers and with this level of intention to help elect other women. So Annie's List, I think, really is a leader in that way. But I think that everybody, if you're serious about politics and making change, donating is one of the most important things that you can do. And people can do it at every level.

I think that one of the myths that we've seen kind of dissipating over the last several electoral cycles is that only major donors can make a difference or have a voice, right? We've seen sort of the triumph of the \$5 donors with some of the national candidates recently. And so I think that there is a growing awareness of the importance of that type of engagement. But you know, it's also the case that many of our candidates tend to be heavily outraised by their male opponents. And so it's not only money that makes a difference. You know, when we are heavily outraised, and yet we win, it's — you know, it's because of the work that we're putting in. Going out, knocking doors, leveraging, personal networks, social networks. You know, there's more to it than money, but money is, for better or worse, and...

EVANS: Well, a support. I mean, it gives some capacity to those types of things that you want to do. I mean obviously a lot of this is on the backbone of volunteers or agencies like your own, but money does help get that capacity. So the idea that even if you're a small donor, it makes a difference. You know, it will help somebody. I'd like to shift a little bit and just — if I gave you a crystal ball — and I don't want to put you on the spot, but if you're looking at over the next two years, what do you see as some of — growing out of what happened in the election in '18, what kind of trends are you seeing for 2020? Are you seeing anything different, or things we should be aware of, or looking to, or things that you — you can also think about answering the question of how you're going to be adjusting in terms of new people who will be coming too now for the 2020 election.

BROOKS: Sure. I think that there are a few trends that we're seeing. I think that one is just the remarkable opportunity for progressive change here in Texas. And I think that 2018 really bore that out. You know, people like to say Texas is a red state, it's going to stay red, we've been chasing sort of turning it blue for years now, and there are skeptics who just don't believe that that is going to happen. But you know, Beto at the top of the ticket in '18 cut Hillary Clinton's vote margin in half, basically, from 2016. And Hillary had cut Obama's vote margin basically in half from 2012. So, you know, we're seeing that shift take place. And part of what's driving it is increased voter participation. An increased number of voters being engaged, being informed, feeling compelled to engage in this process. So, in Texas, in 2018, almost as many people voted in this midterm election as voted in the 2012 presidential election. It's just an incredible sort of increase of people coming out and voting, and almost all of that increases in sort of progressive communities and strongholds. So, I think that's one of the trends that we're excited to see. And that's one of the reasons why Annie's List is really prioritizing — trying to flip control of the state house. We, as Democrats, are nine seats down from control. But Democrats actually flipped 12 seats in 2018. And so the opportunity really seems to be there, and that's what we'll be focusing on.

I think potential issues that lots of people will be trying to figure out how to deal with is the end of straight-ticket voting. This past 2018 general election was the last election with straight-ticket voting in Texas. So there will be some determination of trying to figure out how to communicate the change to voters and make sure that people know what to expect so that they feel comfortable when it's time to vote. But I think the real import of that change is going to ultimately be in making some of these down-ballot races a lot more expensive.

EVANS: Yeah.

BROOKS: Because people who have traditionally run on slates together will now have to run individual campaigns and build up their own name ID. It's going to make the sort of political marketplace that much more crowded, and it's going to take that much more money to be able to kind of make your name stand out for voters.

EVANS: But it's also — on the other hand, it's going to help people really be informed about individual candidates. It's going to force that kind of scrutiny, we hope. We hope.

BROOKS: I do hope that that's the case. But I think that, you know, people will need to be prepared to understand the ways that this is different now.

EVANS: Well, I always think people who don't vote — I don't understand that at all in terms of being an American and not voting. And also having to work to be informed to vote. I mean, that's just something that — this is what the country was built on, an informed citizenry to vote. And this is something we have to come back to. I mean, this is so important, and a lot of people get lazy about it. Or they — the excuse I get, disenfranchised. Oh, there isn't any candidate that I want to vote for, so I'm not going to vote. And it's like, that just is — that is so appalling to me.

BROOKS: *[Laughing]*

EVANS: But seriously, it really is. And I think that's something where everybody, like your organization too, is getting people involved in understanding who's putting themselves — who's putting themselves in the arena? Who's taking that chance to move in, and why are they doing it, and what do they have to offer? And why should or should we not support that person? That's a really important consequence of what you're doing.

BROOKS: Well, I do agree. And I think that everybody should vote.

EVANS: Yes.

BROOKS: And I was raised with that ethic. But I do think that for a lot of people who don't vote, it is not just a matter of sort of personal failing. If I'm a candidate, and I have not given a voter a reason to vote, if I have not made a compelling argument for what the stakes are for why it matters to them, if I haven't reached out directly to them, then that's on me.

EVANS: That's on you. That's right.

BROOKS: So...

EVANS: That's on you. And then that's the consequence in the voting booth. Um... I want to talk a little bit about you.

BROOKS: OK.

EVANS: So why — what's kept you motivated to stay in the political arena? What drives you? What is the energy, and what kind of energy do you get back by being in this political arena? You know, because it's — you've been in the policy arena in many ways, but now you're into like this world of politics, which is how do you get people who will actually think carefully about policy, and create policy that's good for the country, but we have to get through this gauntlet called the political process. And you've been in it, and have stayed in it, and grown in it, and contributed to it. So, what drives you to do that?

BROOKS: Mmm... I think it's my family, my upbringing. I grew up in a very politically active, politically engaged, socially engaged family. And so that was modeled for me by my parents, by my grandparents, growing up. There was no thought of not being engaged in the fight to better our communities and to help people and to try to lift people up where you can. And so, in a way, the moment that we're in now where so many people have sort of realized, you know, in the last couple of years, I have to get involved in this fight, these are dire times, welcome to the fight. It's the same fight that my parents were in that I watched them as a child engaging in every day. It's the same fight that my grandparents were in, when I would hear the stories about civil rights protests and activities. It's always been the same fight. And either you're in it, or you're not. I was never not going to be in it.

EVANS: Mm-hmm. So, it's in your DNA. *[Laughing]*

BROOKS: It's in something. Yes, it is. *[Laughing]*

EVANS: Very good. That's great. So I just want to thank you so much, Royce, for taking the time to talk with me and share your ideas, both in terms of the direction of Annie's List and its contributions to our policy communities, as well as your own personal story. So, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

BROOKS: Thank you for having me. This was fun.

♪ (guitar music) ♪

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