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[00:00:33] **Speaker 1** It seemed like the whole world was watching Wisconsin and its Supreme Court election this past Tuesday. How does the victory for liberal judge Susan Crawford inform the political direction more broadly going forward? We check in with Chair of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, Ben Wickler, and thanks very much for being here.

[00:00:51] **Speaker 2** Thanks for having me, Frederica.

[00:00:52] **Speaker 1** So were you expecting a 10-point lead for Susan Crawford?

[00:00:56] **Speaker 2** I was not. You know, the Republicans, Elon Musk, the whole kind of right-wing machine poured more money into this race than we've ever seen in any judicial election in American history. And it seemed hard to believe they didn't have a theory behind it. As it turned out, they did drive up their turnout. They won enough votes to defeat Janet Protasewicz in 2023. They hit their target. It's just that the number of votes for Susan Crawford was so much more This was a combination of an amazing candidate with a superb campaign and full support from the party and all the different allied groups. Also, Elon Musk personally inserting himself in a way that I think incited more people to vote against Brad Schiml than for Brad Schimmel. And then on top of all that, there's a rage in the electorate right now about what's happening to this country. The sense that our constitution's being ripped to shreds, that social security's under attack, things that should be politically off limits are being. torn to pieces by Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and the Republicans, and I think that expressed itself in a margin of victory that not only says something about this race and people's preference for the integrity of Susan Crawford over what they saw in Brad Shimmel, but also the direction of politics in this whole national moment.

[00:02:06] **Speaker 1** When you saw Elon Musk in Green Bay up on stage with a cheese head, what was going through your head?

[00:02:14] **Speaker 2** First of all, I thought, that's not your cheesehead, buddy. Secondly, it felt to me like Wisconsin can't fall for this. Surely it can't for this, this is the richest man in the world who is pulling money out of the pockets of people all over our state. They just fired everyone involved in the low income home heating program. These are programs that help people stay warm in the winter in Wisconsin that they're dismantling to fund extra tax cuts for people like Elon Musk. So that's happening with one hand, the other hand is holding a million-dollar novelty check. It was such a transparent attempt to buy our election and our democracy in order to enrich the already ultra-wealthy at the expense of working people that it felt like I hoped with all my being that it would backfire. As it turned out, it backfired big time.

[00:02:57] **Speaker 1** How do Democrats intend to trade on the Trump agenda going forward?

[00:03:03] **Speaker 2** Well, unfortunately... There's a huge amount to run against, and Democrats can simply say what we're for. We believe in a country that works for working people, not just for the ultra wealthy. We believe every person should have basic freedoms and dignity and respect. And that creates a gigantic contrast with an administration that seems intent on torpedoing the entire economy and then carving out chunks of special favors for the wealthy friends of the president, as though he's a mob boss dividing up the spoils. This is a totally catastrophic administration that seems to be intent on steering us into a recession. And all the Republicans in Congress and in the Senate, they seem to chicken about mean tweets from Trump and Elon Musk or maybe primary challenges to do anything about it. So there's going to be a wave. You can already feel it building. You could see the first cresting of that wave in Wisconsin on Tuesday. But I think it's going sweep this whole country for these next two years and probably the next four years because they're so, so bad at this right now. And Democrats actually believe in making government work for people.

[00:04:05] **Speaker 1** What kind of advice do you have for Democrats nationally to replicate what happened in Wisconsin this week?

[00:04:10] **Speaker 2** Well, first, what Susan Crawford did I think is really a model. She was crystal clear at every stop. She would say, I never dreamed as a little girl growing up in Chippewa Falls that I'd be up against the richest man in the world. She made the case about her integrity by telling her life story, about growing up with a sibling with special needs who she took care of, a protective instinct, her work as a prosecutor, and then working in state government, then in private practice defending Planned Parenthood, which drew a contrast on abortion, which is still very powerful issue in our state, I think a lot of states. And then, as a judge, how she treated everyone equally who walked into our courtroom. And then the contrast was corruption. So it wasn't just that Brad Chambl was very far right-wing and supported the abortion ban, it was also the corruption of giving special favors to his campaign contributors. And Elon Musk and Trump are kind of guaranteeing that every Republican in Washington gets caught in that swirl of corruption right now. The message about who's serving the ultra rich and who's serve regular folks, that ties into a question of character. And I think for Democrats, being clear about their character, about their values, about who they're gonna work for and fight for, And then drawing a clear contrast with the other side not wavering or backing down or cowering that actually is a model I think will work Well people want to see candidates who are ready to fight for things that most Americans believe in and I think that's what Democrats can offer

[00:05:28] **Speaker 1** What is your comment on being part of the most expensive court race in U.S. history?

[00:05:35] **Speaker 2** My comment is, it is long past time for campaign finance reform. This is preposterous. And I say that, you know, the Democrats have outraised Republicans in our state party for most of the last bunch of years. And I was saying that even then, it's part of our state-party platform very clearly. The Wisconsin campaign finance laws were written after McCain Feingold, I was a Russ Feingald intern, was struck down with Citizens United. And then nationally, the flood of dark money came in in Wisconsin, Robin Voss and Republicans rewrote our campaign finance law in 2015. If Democrats regain control, let's clean up our politics, and if Republicans would like to actually join Democrats to do that, let get started together. But this idea that the richest people in the world should blunder in, hand out million dollar checks and try to buy our democracy, it's an affront to the idea of a country where the people are supposed to rule, not the power of wealth. And we have a lot of work to do to create a change.

[00:06:27] **Speaker 1** Ben Wickler, thanks very much.

[00:06:29] **Speaker 2** Thanks so much.

[00:06:39] **Speaker 1** how fabulous you are at raising money, right?

[00:06:42] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I mean, we're using the rules that they wrote, and that, you know, we've been, at every step, we've advocated for changes in these laws. I will also say, if big money leaves politics, we are much better at small dollar fundraising, too, and if money is not the factor, I think our policies are more popular. So, we would like to have an even playing field, but this is, it felt like the kind of reductio ad absurdum of our campaign finance laws, what we just experienced. It's like what people warned about when Citizens United went through. literally. the richest person on planet Earth, flying in his private jet. Yeah, I know. And finding out bribes, like, come on.

[00:07:16] **Speaker 1** You know, and it's funny to me, just as a citizen, you kind of, you've got to believe that the votes and voters, they don't go.

[00:07:25] **Speaker 2** No, well that was what I was so glad to see.