I wish I’d had the benefit of Estevan’s advice to take the long view when I started working to unrig elections in my own city, Berkeley, California, back in 2003.

Inspired by states like Maine and Arizona, where candidates running with public funding weren’t dependent on wealthy interests, I started a campaign to pass a clean elections law so that candidates for Berkeley city council and mayor didn’t have to depend on wealthy interests either.

As in Seattle, it took just a few committed people to get started.

My campaign partner, Sam Ferguson, was a junior in college. I ran a small business teaching people with hand injuries how to use special software to talk to their computers instead of type.

Neither of us had run a campaign before.
For two years, Sam and I spent every free minute on the campaign.

We met with council members and the mayor to try to win them over.

We reached out to a public interest legal group, who wrote for us a proposed Berkeley law.

Then we successfully lobbied the city council to put the proposed law on the ballot.

As the election drew near, I was buzzing with excitement that when the ballot measure passed, I, at age thirty-five, would have accomplished something significant and important.
Meanwhile, the citizen team I was part of made a few more efforts to put a clean elections law back on the Berkeley ballot. Our efforts were repeatedly blocked by the mayor and his allies on the city council.

Years went by. The Supreme Court ushered in even more money in politics, and Americans became more aware of its grotesque effects.

I found it hard, emotionally, to make the effort again. My desire for change was just as strong, but I was held back by my past feelings of despair.

What if I threw myself into another campaign, and it lost? I was afraid of feeling once again that I had failed my city and failed myself.

People who have risen to power are loath to make changes to the system that got them there.

And some new people in Berkeley wanted to make another attempt at unrigging the city’s money in politics rules.

I was dejected, feeling like a failure for more than a year.

I tormented myself. If only I had reached out to more people. Or made one or two fewer mistakes.
I wanted some assurance that this time would be different. This time we’d succeed. But after many talks with people I was close to, I realized that politics is not predictable. There was so much that was outside of my control, no matter how hard I tried.

I realized that I could put in months or years of work on a new campaign, only to earn the equivalent of a roll of the dice. An odd number, the measure loses again.

But an even number would unrig the rules, change the way people could run for office and get elected, change who our leaders pay attention to, and make our whole city better.

I realized that the benefits of winning were so great that it was worth enormous effort just for a chance to roll the dice.
And I realized that I could separate my success as a person from the success of the campaign. My job was to make the best effort I could, regardless of the outcome.

It took this shift in perspective—you might call it humility, or maturity, in the face of the world’s uncertainty—for me to throw myself into the new campaign.

Finally, in 2016, they did.

The proposed law was simple and powerful, a “supermatch” to amplify the support of small donors.

We drafted a new proposed law, and for three years a dedicated group of four of us lobbied the city council to put it on the ballot.

I threw myself into the campaign with a core steering group of fifteen, and more than 100 volunteers who knocked on doors, made phone calls, and talked with voters. On Election Day, we came through with a victory!

A whopping 65% of voters supported clean elections, and the new, unrigged system became part of Berkeley’s city constitution.
Most of us have a comfort zone—an environment of friends, family, maybe a job or school—that we can predict and influence. Where we generally know what to expect.

Politics, though, is unpredictable. If you work to change the rules of our country or your town, you are entering a world that neither you nor anyone else can predict or control. You can push hard, working together with others, to make things happen, or stop things from happening. But there is always uncertainty.

Reflecting back on my story, and learning from others, I’ve seen that...

...A core group of just a handful of people can make major changes happen.

...Meeting regularly in person is essential (supplemented by email and phone). Online-only is not enough. People need the motivation and trust that comes from seeing others face-to-face.

...A first unsuccessful attempt paves the way for success later.

...With so much unpredictability in politics—and the outcomes so important—it’s worth working hard to get set up for a possible win, even if it seems unlikely. You may be able to push the levers of power hard enough for the dice to roll your way!