

Rocky's road: One of the country's greenest mayors guns for the White House



By Greg Hanscom
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Rocky Anderson shows off the solar panels on his roof. (Photo by Kate Sheppard.)

When we last spoke with Rocky Anderson, he was kicking some serious butt for the planet from his position as the supergreen mayor of Salt Lake City, Utah. Anderson, an unflinching champion of issues ranging from climate action to gay marriage, quit politics in 2008 after two terms in office. But now he's back, and this time he's trained his sights on the White House.

Running for president under the banner of the Justice Party (his Facebook followers reportedly came up with name), and backed by a tiny, mostly volunteer staff, Anderson promises a grassroots, social-media-powered campaign that will give Obama and his yet-to-be-determined Republican rival a run for their money.

It will be no small task: Obama has raised a war chest of close to \$100 million, according to *The New York Times*. Mitt Romney is sitting on \$32 million. Anderson, whose platform centers on ridding American politics of the "corrupting influence of money," is remarkably uncorrupted by that measure. Accepting a maximum of \$100 per donor, he has raised less than \$1 million so far. Like, way, way less.

But Rocky is fierce and determined, and he's pissed about what short shrift American workers and the environment keep getting while the political elite and Wall Street fat cats get ever fatter. Given the outrage we've seen in the Occupy movement in recent months, his message is bound to strike a chord.

We caught up with the former mayor this week to see what in the world has gotten into him.

Q. What possessed you to run for president?

A. I was very reluctant to do this but ... this needs to be done. I think the American people are ready for fundamental change. There is utter disgust with Congress ... the president has low approval ratings. Members of the two dominant parties are fed up ... There really is a perfect storm in terms of the resonance that the idea of a major new political party has with the American people.

With people voting either Republican or Democrat, they're simply reaffirming the system, and are contenting themselves with moving players within that system around. What the Justice Party and my campaign are about is to radically change that system so that we can eliminate the plutocracy — that is, government by the wealthy — and ensure instead that our government finally represents the public interest.

Q. Was the Occupy movement a part of your inspiration?

A. There's an enormous convergence between the concerns expressed in the Occupy movement and what my concerns have been for many years. Except for the violence and destruction of property that we've recently seen, the Occupy movement as a whole has been a very healthy thing in this country ...

One of the great inspirations for us was what we saw in much of the Arab world, where people were intent on overthrowing their nations' dictators ... They put their lives on the line, utilizing democratized means of communication through social networking and engaging in classic grassroots organizing — and they succeeded.

We can do the same in this country. We don't need to raise a billion dollars from special interests ... We can limit the contributions to a hundred dollars per person and depend on a lot of people helping out and becoming involved, so that we together can overthrow the dictatorship of corrupt money in our government.

Q. How much have you raised?

A. At last count, it was in the neighborhood of \$10,000 or \$12,000. But we really haven't done much in the area of fundraising other than one e-mail solicitation. We had a lot to do before we felt we could persuade people to contribute to the campaign. I've been on a lot of national and local media all over the country. We're revamping our website, voterocky.org. We're putting together position papers. We're working seven days a week, often 14 hours or longer. We're now at the point where we think we can utilize, in a very intense way, social media opportunities and encourage people to help us meet our financial needs.

Q. You've said that your first move as president would be to pass a constitutional amendment overturning the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling — to get money out of politics. What other issues are you trying to bring into this campaign?

A. First and foremost, the wars — I would end them immediately. They have been devastating to this country and to the world, and they just feed into the corrupt military-industrial complex.

Also, we know that whether the Republican or Democratic parties are in power, this country will not provide the essential international leadership on climate change that's required to combat the most catastrophic consequences of the climate crisis. I've been working on climate change issues for more than a dozen years. I've spoken all over the world. I received the World Leadership Forum's world leadership award in London for my work on the climate. I received the EPA's environmental protection award for my work.

I reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 31 percent in three years in city operations when I was mayor, then took our successes and worked to communicate best practices and provide inspiration to mayors not only throughout United States, but many other countries. I co-founded, with Robert Redford, the Sundance Summit. For three years, we brought together dozens of mayors to learn about climate change, energy policy, and the vital role that cities have in addressing those issues. Cities can make all the difference if they have knowledgeable, committed leadership.

Q. In a recent speech at the United Nations, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that mayors "don't have the luxury of simply talking about change but not delivering it." Given what we

know about the federal government, wouldn't you be better off just working city by city?

A. The problem is that we don't have a very large window of opportunity to take decisive action. Mayors and other city officials have a vital role in raising public awareness of climate change ... because if we don't move things rapidly in a more positive direction in terms of public support for climate protection policies and practices, it's going to be too late.

As the science becomes more robust every year, polls show that public support for climate protection measures actually gets worse. That's been happening for several years now. I think it's because the ... issue has been left by default with environmental organizations which keep fixating on polar bears — which may help bring in money from their base, but it does nothing to persuade the public about the urgent need to take measures to reverse the trend.

In our cities, if leaders can adopt policies that save money ... and demonstrate that all of this is really good for everybody, that can go a long way toward changing our nation's policies. But we don't have any time to lose. It's absolutely vital that we have far more aggressive and honest leadership on the federal level, because for the long term, there is no more important issue for the United States and the international community to be addressing right now.

Q. What should the federal government be doing to make our cities work again?

A. There was enormous investment in cities under President Clinton. He was a president who understood the importance of cities not only in terms of quality of life for people in this country, but in moving the nation as a whole forward, providing good education, building a better future, and providing jobs.

During the eight years after Clinton, there was almost a complete abandonment of any interest in the [Bush] administration toward cities. The mass transit share from the federal government plummeted. The research and development dollars dwindled. We're still spending far less on research and development as a percentage of gross domestic product than we did in the 1960s, and far less than many nations that are thriving ...

We see countries like China doing far better work, and creating conditions where they will benefit enormously in the marketplace because of their commitment to developing clean, renewable sources of energy. China now makes more than half of the world's solar panels. It manufactures more than half of the world's wind turbines.

Q. Did you watch the State of the Union address last week?

A. I did.

Q. What jumped out at you?

A. A lot. President Obama started and ended the speech with a very militaristic, cheerleading appeal. I thought that he was channeling George W. Bush, claiming that through the extremely tragic and enormously wasteful illegal war of aggression in Iraq, the U.S. was safer and more respected around the world ... If the American people still buy that after all the disclosures about the debacle of that war and the lies that led us into it, I really fear for this country.

Then he went on to talk about the kind of country we all want, and he said that it would be one where everybody plays by the same set of rules. And yet we have a two-tiered system of justice under this president and his predecessor that is unprecedented ... President Obama has raised more money from Wall Street than any other candidate ever has. His administration has failed to prosecute one person for the

financial fraud that helped lead to the economic meltdown from which the rest of us are still reeling, and from which these criminals are still benefitting. That's a very good return on investment for these Wall Street bankers ...

I barely heard him mention climate change. He had a throwaway line. It's like he knew he had to at least use the term at some point because he didn't even use it in his last State of the Union address.

On jobs, he's been pathetic. Even if everything he says that he wants gets done, it wouldn't come close to meeting the needs of working people in this country ... How does he, with a straight face, talk about getting jobs back to the U.S. without even mentioning free trade agreements, and the need to significantly renegotiate those agreements to put them in better balance in terms of worker rights and environmental protections? Our government has been in collusion with the corporate sector, and providing them with very cheap labor under outrageous circumstances while the working people in this country have gotten absolutely shafted ...

He doesn't even have to be creative. He can just hearken back to what FDR did with the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] and the WPA [Works Progress Administration] programs, putting people to work in building up our nation's infrastructure ... The federal government should be retrofitting every one of its buildings over 30 years old. Bring them up to LEED certified standards. He'd be hiring hundreds of thousands of people, putting them to work, reducing energy usage, and ending up with a far improved federal infrastructure.

Q. To be fair, Obama is up against the Republicans in Congress.

A. He's president of the United States and he can make the case to the American people the way FDR did on Social Security. FDR went out and fought for Social Security because it was the right thing to do. He didn't throw it out there and let Congress fight over the little pieces and end up with this horrific compromise ...

Sure, you're always going to be facing opposition, but if you bring the American people along with you, that's what real leadership is. It's not just having an eye on the polls and being led along by them. It's about standing up for what is right and making your case for it and getting the job done ... And that's what this president has utterly failed to do. He ran a great campaign. He was in a wonderful position with the support of this country for real change. And he has absolutely blown it.

Q. You're expressing frustrations that a lot of people are feeling right now. How do we channel this outrage into meaningful political reform?

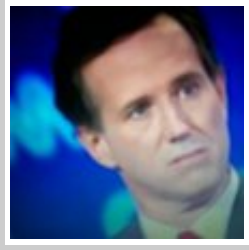
A. The best thing we can do is essentially occupy the elections. Stand up and say we're not going to take it any more. As a citizenry, regardless of our prior political affiliations, we ought to be joining together and saying there are certain fundamentals we insist upon, and none of those will be met by either the Republican or the Democratic party because they helped create the system and they thrive from the corruption in the system ...

President Obama didn't wake up one day and say that it would be a great public policy decision to veto the EPA's efforts to reduce ozone emissions. There's only one reason he did that and it's the corrupting interests of those polluting industries. It's the same thing with climate change. We're never going to see the kinds of fundamental changes that need to be made to reverse the tide toward catastrophic climate disruption unless we change our system — and to do that we need to get beyond this Republican and Democratic duopoly.

Grist special projects editor Greg Hanscom has been editor of the award-winning environmental magazine High

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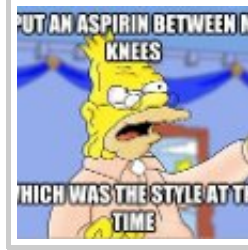
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