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How Jess King spurred a Silicon Valley-led fundraising blitz that netted \$200K for her and \$1.7 million for other candidates



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Jun 17, 2018



Jessica King announces her run for Congress on Tuesday, July 18, 2017.

Suzette Wenger

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In the heart of Silicon Valley, among dozens of software engineers and computer programmers, Lancaster's newest congressional candidate described her Mennonite upbringing and her work in community organizing.

She talked about invigorating small businesses, such as a painting company and a Dutch stroopies operation.

Now, she told them, her mission was to run on a progressive platform and unseat an incumbent Republican congressman in "Trump country." And she needed their help.



POLITICS

Problem Solvers Caucus parent group was behind \$277K in super-PAC spending for U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker and \$3 million for others

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The mid-September meeting was something of an experiment for a Polish-American tech entrepreneur named Maciej Ceglowski. He wanted to test whether a group he formed after the 2016 election could go from merely speaking out against policies like Trump's "travel ban" to actually helping to elect candidates who could create change.

"I thought maybe we could get her a few thousand dollars," said Ceglowski, a former web developer at Yahoo who went on to create an internet bookmarking site called Pinboard.

Seven months later, Jess King's campaign had not only collected \$208,000 — more than a third of her overall fundraising — from the tech community in San Francisco and beyond, but she had inspired them to pull together \$1.7 million for a slate of nine candidates with similar progressive profiles.

From smaller niche companies to behemoths like Amazon, Google and Facebook, the tech workers became something of a silent force in these races.

They bolstered a select number of Democrats who came from outside the party establishment and faced uphill battles in Republican strongholds.

King, who was unchallenged in the May 15 primary, will face Republican U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker in November in what every pundit believes will be a blowout for the incumbent in a district with 100,000 more Republicans than Democrats.

Still, King is undaunted, citing what she said is an unprecedented volunteer base and fundraising operation for a first-time candidate in Lancaster.

Ceglowski and his army of tech workers are a major reason why.

‘Tech Solidarity’

Ceglowski said he had never before met a congressional candidate or representative — or even donated to one — when he visited Lancaster last July on the same day King declared her candidacy in Penn Square.

He was there to meet with Jonathan Smucker, a longtime local progressive community organizer who had been advising Ceglowski about how to grow the base of politically active tech workers in the age of Trump.

Tech Solidarity, Ceglowski’s group, had come together after the 2016 election “out of a real deep sense of fear” that powerful technology companies like Facebook and Google would align themselves with, or be used by, the new administration, he said.

But there was only so much tech workers could do in their home districts. Democrats, like Ceglowski’s representative, Nancy Pelosi, would win even without the tech vote.

“The tech industry is rich but we also don’t have much of a voice either at our companies or politically,” said Ceglowski.

Then he met Jess King.

“I was just really taken with her approach, her message. She kind of frames things in terms of small businesses, which traditionally Republicans have done, and I thought that was a brilliant move,” Ceglowski said. “On a personal level, she seemed like a very decent person.”

By mid-September, he was hosting King in San Francisco for Tech Solidarity’s first meeting with a candidate. Among a group of 70, they raised close to \$30,000 — and it only snowballed from there.



Maciej Ceglowski, a San Francisco-based tech entrepreneur, has helped raise more than \$200,000 for Jess King, a Lancaster Democrat running for Congress. Ceglowski and King are seen here during a trip King made to San Francisco in December 2017.

He set up an [ActBlue fundraising web page](#), a common fundraising tool for

Courtesy of Maciej Ceglowski via Twitter

candidates, and searched through campaign finance reports to find others to support.

The result was a “Great Slate” of nine candidates by the end of March — three in Pennsylvania, two in California, and one each in Maine, New Mexico, Colorado and Iowa.

Ceglowski started [using Pinboard’s Twitter account to solicit money](#), invited the candidates out to San Francisco and visited them in their districts. He [returned to Lancaster](#) three times to get an up-close look at King’s operation and sit in on her campaign’s frequent house parties.

By the time King officially filed signatures in March to get on the spring primary ballot, Ceglowski took to Twitter to claim credit.

“If all of you who donated to the Great Slate had not supported Jess King, PA-11 would not have a Democratic candidate on the ballot. You are also goddamned heroes,” [he tweeted](#).

In an interview, Ceglowski said he didn’t want to claim that King would have otherwise dropped out. But he insisted “she was able to run a different kind of race because of the funding we provided.”

King said she hadn’t seen the tweet and didn’t have a reaction to it, though she acknowledged that his support has been vital in the tireless voter outreach effort from her campaign.

“His support has definitely been very, very helpful for us as we build this unprecedented ground game,” said King. “What we’ve done with the money is invest it in organizing staff that mobilizes as many volunteers as we can to scale up the voter outreach program.”



POLITICS

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Tech support

Ceglowski's "Great Slate" web page has attracted 4,696 donors contributing a total of \$208,818 for King to date, according to ActBlue.

That's roughly 40 percent of the more-than half-million she has raised since the start of her campaign.

Donors include programmers and software engineers who mostly live in California but also come from places like Seattle, Boston and Austin, according King's campaign finance reports.

Some work for the largest technology companies in the world — Amazon and Google, Facebook and Twitter, Apple and Microsoft, PayPal, Pinterest and Tesla.

Most, King said, are the "working people" and not the owners of their companies.

They're folks who are "really concerned with the corruption in Washington" and about the role of monopolies in the economy," King said. They offer their support because they share her values and progressive vision.

"They're not CEOs, not the sort-of tech leadership. They're tech workers," she said.

But her list of donors also reveal some higher-profile names.

Daniel Stewart Butterfield, who created Slack and Flickr, donated \$1,000. Matt Mullenweg, the CEO and founder of the company that created WordPress.com — a common website builder — gave her \$2,700.

Chris Saccheri, who is listed as "not employed" on the campaign finance document but was an original developer for LinkedIn, gave her \$1,500.

And Tech Solidary's reach is likely larger than even the tech community. Doctors, nurses, teachers and business owners across the country have all given to King — and some potentially only because of Ceglowski's efforts.

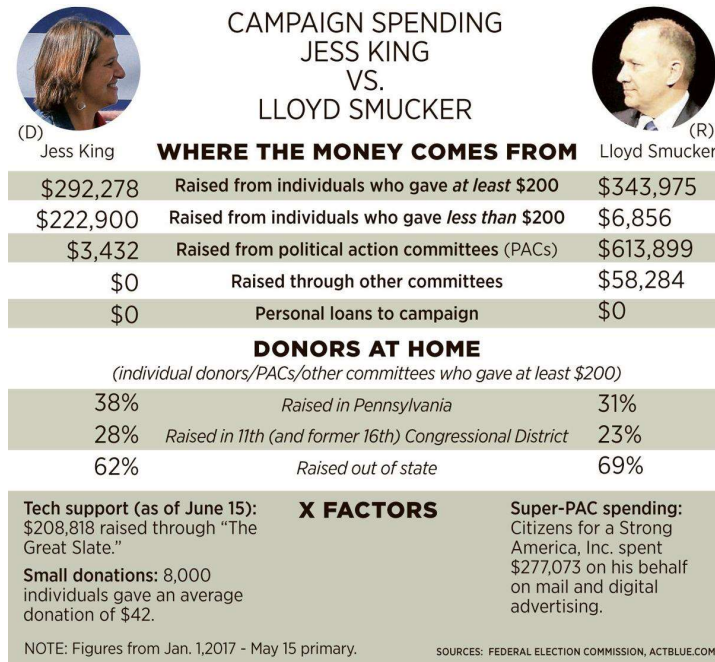
"I'm a (New York City public schools) teacher and donated," one Twitter user tweeted in reply to one of Pinboard's tweets in December. "Can't vouch for others but heeded advice to give until it hurts ... maybe I should donate more?"

Jonathan Smucker said it's all a symptom of a larger national movement.

"We're in a moment right now where a lot of different people are looking at the state of the country and saying, 'What can we do?'" Smucker said. "Maciej's done that with the industry he's in with tech workers."

Smucker, for his part, said he did not advise Ceglowski to support King or start fundraising for candidates. Lancaster Stands Up, the progressive grassroots group that Smucker helps lead, endorsed King in December but it is legally required to work independently from her campaign.

He said his involvement with Lancaster Stands Up also prevents him from talking about the King campaign with his wife, Becca Rast, who is King's campaign manager.



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Outside help

In all, King has said she's received 12,000 donations from more than 8,000 individual donors.

The average donation is \$42.

She's had to disclose the identities of donors behind roughly half of her total funds, because candidates are only required to reveal the donors who give at least \$200.

As of her latest available fundraising reports, about \$112,700 of the \$295,700 disclosed came from within Pennsylvania.

And about \$83,700 came from within the 11th district.

In the age of big money in politics, it's not unusual for candidates to draw most of their campaign funds from outside the districts they're running in, said Dickinson College professor of American politics David O'Connell.

It's also something that has contributed to the polarization of American politics, he said.

“Why would someone in California care who gets the nomination in (Pennsylvania's) 10th Congressional District? They're likely to have really strong opinions on the issues,” he said.

Ceglowski, when asked if he had hesitations about so much of a candidate's money coming from out of their own district, said it's about giving candidates a shot when they might not otherwise have one.

“There's no way someone's going to raise a half a million in New Mexico's 2nd district or in Lancaster,” he said. “The money's just not there.”

King said where the financial support comes from — geographically — isn't as important as the “shared values and shared vision” of those who donate.

“It's about who you are accountable to,” said King, who is not taking money from corporations' political action committees, which the employers of some of her tech supporters use to make large donations to both sides of the aisle.

What's next

By May, the “Great Slate” fundraising page boasted it had raised more than \$1.7 million for its nine candidates.

Besides King, the two other Pennsylvanians on the list were Shavonnia Corbin-Johnson in the Harrisburg-based 10th district, and Greg Edwards in the Allentown-based 7th district.

Both candidates fell short in crowded primaries on May 15 — marking the first blows to the candidates Ceglowski hand-picked.

Corbin-Johnson had joined the slate only when Christina Hartman, who had been running against King, [switched to the Harrisburg district](#) in late February.

Hartman's move came after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's shuffling of the congressional district lines, which gave Democrats a better chance in the Harrisburg district and a [much steeper climb in Lancaster](#).

Ceglowski took issue with Hartman's decision, and also with reports that Hartman tried to coerce Corbin-Johnson out of the race by offering her a job (Hartman's team denies this).

In a Twitter rant on March 7, Ceglowski called Hartman a “vulture” while announcing his support for Corbin-Johnson.

“I can kind of understand the switching districts but the offering of her job I thought was very presumptuous and left a bad taste in my mouth,” Ceglowski said later. “I don’t have any personal animus toward Hartman. I do think politically she is unelectable in Lancaster or in the new PA10.”

Hartman soon dropped out completely, but the boost to Corbin-Johnson’s campaign was already initiated. Her campaign raised at least \$94,314 from tech donors in the three weeks after the endorsement, according to campaign finance reports.

She said the money was going right into her digital campaign strategy.

“It just means we have a lot more options — options we never really realized we would have running in a more-or-less red area,” Corbin-Johnson said before her narrow primary loss. “It allowed us to expand our strategy and connect and reach out to more voters.”

Hartman’s team, however, felt the effects of Ceglowski’s efforts from the other side — in both the districts where she ran.

“Maciej Ceglowski is one of a new breed of mega-donor,” said Hartman’s former campaign manager Mike Wilson. “He bashes the Democratic party publicly for the attention and then begs the party privately for its support. He’s only interested in power and his outright hatred for Christina Hartman is puzzling.”

Ceglowski acknowledges the influence he’s had and the power dynamics at play now that he’s “stumbled into something that turned out to be effective.”

“I don’t want to be the Tom Steyer type of figure who decides what’s best for the country,” he said, referring to the billionaire Democratic mega-donor.

But Ceglowski’s reach is also undeniable, even if the results — in terms of getting candidates elected — have been far from great.

After his two Pennsylvania candidates lost, four other candidates on the Great Slate lost in contested primaries, and two walked away victorious.

Ceglowski has since added a couple Colorado Democrats who will face their first tests during primaries on June 26. He also told supporters in a semi-regular newsletter that the defeated Greg Edwards was going to keep his campaign account open to help other

Democrats this year, and that one of the failed candidates' campaign managers was joining his team.

Ceglowski's next moves, and the future impact of his Silicon Valley donors, remain to be seen.

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