

Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce

Expert Dialogue with Francis Johnson

Francis Johnson - Module #3

Elizabeth Doty: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force Expert Dialogue. My name's Elizabeth Doty, and I'm the Director of the Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force at the Erb Institute at the University of Michigan, and I'll be moderating today's Expert dialogue with Francis Johnson of Take Back Our Republic.

The Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force, or CPRT, is an initiative of the Erb Institute, a 25 year long partnership between the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability at the [02:11:00] University of Michigan. Led by Managing Director Terry Nelodov and Faculty Director Tom Lyon, the Erb Institute is known for its leadership in three areas, teaching and learning, business engagement with groups like the CPRT, and scholarly and applied research.

The CPRT's mission is to help companies better align their approach to political influence with their commitments to purpose and values, sustainability, and stakeholders. As we're seeing, corporate political responsibility is an increasingly pivotal element in managing stakeholder trust, addressing systemic issues, and rebuilding public trust in institutions.

I am very excited to be able to speak with Francis Johnson today. We met, I think it was in 2018 talking about pay to play politics and money in politics and how it's affecting priorities across the political spectrum and trust in the system and polarization. The focus today will be addressing pay to play politics and a conservative view on the need for political reform.

Francis is in a very interesting [02:12:00] position to be able to speak to this. He is the president of a group called Take Back Our Republic, which is a conservative, non partisan organization working to ensure power and influence is returned to We the People, putting voters first. And they're doing so in collaboration with other reform groups across the political spectrum.

So it's a really interesting case study. He's a founding partner of Communications Resources, a public affairs, public relations, and political consultancy, has worked at all levels of national political campaigns, serving in the Bush Quayle campaign of 92, Bush Cheney in 2000 and 2004, McCain and Palin in 2008, worked on public affairs initiatives in defense, energy, agriculture, IT, health care, and has been political director for the Senate Action Committee and the Conservative Action Alliance.

And I think maybe most exciting, and I hope you'll talk a little bit about it, is he's one of 16 inaugural fellows in a new fellowship called the Brewer Fellowship, which is a joint project of the Institute for Citizens and Scholars. I think used to be the [02:13:00] Woodrow Wilson Institute. Unite America and Cultivate the Carass supporters of non partisan organizations working to put voters first.

So really some interesting background. I, I wanted to share some of that because we'll draw on that in the conversation today.

I'd love for you to talk a little bit more broadly about your agenda for political reform. You've talked about rank choice voting. You've mentioned American Promise. I was talking about this bill around credit card contributions. Can you give an overview of the reforms you're supporting? No need to go into the The credit card bill or the rank choice, I think, but the others and how you're partnering with groups left, right and center.

Francis Johnson: Well, I would go back to run off because we're working out in California with the more choice, San Diego. And this is a group that is working to change the process there in San Diego and have had. very good results and we're working with them to take it statewide. So, you know, that's a major one and that's, you [02:14:00] know, that's all I'll speak about that.

But others is gerrymandering for. And, you know, one of the issues and because we did some work supported Ohio's push to move to independent redistricting committees. That's one of the main things we're doing. If everyone knows that every 10 years with the census, they come back, there's a major redistricting.

It's it happens in between them, but the major is always after the census. And you know what happens is usually it's the party that's in power keeps the people in on these, you know, quote, commissions that draw the lines and think nothing ever, you know, changes. It got so bad in the state of North Carolina that it ended up for years.

It was a judge. Judge makes a decision on, you know, how these district wide, which is, which is, it's crazy, leaving up the, you know, the one person most a lot of times that unelected judge appointed judge. So, you know, those are, you know, the kinds of [02:15:00] things that we have to change we're trying to change and there's a lot of other groups that are, you know, working in the gerrymandering, you know, area.

And we also did an earned media up there in the state of Michigan. Which led up to the on the Supreme Court that will allow residents to move for the redistricting efforts. I think there was a case that came up that the, I guess the voters were trying to, and they were pushed back and went to court when we won.

But anyway, we, the. We have a great field, you know, operation. We have representative, we have field groups in, in all 50 states. And then I mentioned Vicki Barnes is, you know, you're helping us up there in Minnesota you know, on these, on issues when they come up there in Minnesota, that's part of the, that process that we're doing on, on that statewide basis.

And the other is the dark money. The FEC recently voted to allow foreign entities to donate to ballot initiatives here in the States, which, you know, everyone was [02:16:00] just kind of flabbergasted. And this really opens the floodgates to untold amounts of money from outside the U. S. Flood into, you know, the process.

So we're, you know, really heavily working that issue, you know, right now. And you know, we have, you know, updates on that on states that have already put laws in place that won't allow any, you know, money. Basically going through their states you know, against you know, for this, for these commissions, which is a real, it's, it's, it's one that's really active now that we're actively pursuing on a daily basis on the pay to pay doesn't always mean there's money changing hands.

A lot of times certain political favors are given. So it's not so much you know, we'll, you, you'll garner support this particular group to, to support this particular candidate. And it's, you know, no money changed hands, just, you know, just certain entities will support this.

And all of a sudden that particular family member or so [02:17:00] forth, it's a a particular job at administration or a high profile job.

So a lot of those that, you know, we're, we're following that right now, we're looking at there's a piece that the letter that myself and our. executive director, we wrote to the secretary of state of Pennsylvania and had regard to the the chancellor of the University of Pennsylvania to she's being nominated as the ambassador to Germany.

And there were certain issues, you know, that we had, you know, in that that were part of its pay to pay politics. And then candidate Biden happened to get a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania for 900, 000 a year, never taught day one, you know, on that. And so the piece that you know, wrote that we also was in the Wall Street Journal and so forth.

And if people go to our website, you'll see all that [02:18:00] information. So those are the issues that we follow. That was a definitely pay to play. Peace. But it's, it's, it's kind of ongoing right now. We're, we're trying to get the, the senate to to squash that nomination.

Elizabeth Doty: Understand. And it's, it's very interesting.

I mean, when I talked to others, I always learn of examples that are outside of my normal news channels, right? So this is, it's really helpful to hear you pointing to the behaviors even if they're not for candidates or, or elected officials I normally think about.

Let me ask you now about the organizations you're working with, and you mentioned American Promise earlier, and we have a number of people on the call from American Promise. If you could mention what your work is with them, and then also, I think you work with Unite America. And bridge alliance. You've mentioned them.

Do you mind sharing a little bit? Because I want to point out just to those on the call. There is this burgeoning movement of people who are working across political lines to create foundations for trusted [02:19:00] institutions and more the way the people and it's heavily underfunded. It's heavily, heavily underfunded.

And so it's really good to know about these and I'd love for Francis for you to share. Not, this is not a promotion to join them, but you need to know that, that these are out there. So go ahead, Francis.

Francis Johnson: This is pre COVID when American Promise was doing their legislative days on the Hill.

As a matter of fact, I think that that's where you and I met. Elizabeth, when at the time during one of those when their American promise was making their Hill visits and we were going around helping in their introduction of the 28th amendment and trying to get the congressman and, you know, senators to kind of help push this in each, you know, state.

So when we would go into offices along with the the areas that take back, which was at the time was our credit card bill. And basically went to [02:20:00] the staff members and so forth. And we kind of went over the benefits of what passing the 28th amendment and how the, it would really, you know, help the money in politics, you know, issue down the line.

And we, we got a very good response, you know, from that, and it was, it was good because when you look at a lot of the issue, not a lot, some of the issues that America promised, we're, we're kind of different, they're more, you know, on the left and we're on the right, but we do agree on, on that particular issue that we would do support.

On the United America, we did some work, this was up in a state of this past year up in the state of Wyoming. There were several grants that were given for work for ranked choice voting and instant runoff. I know I spoke about earlier, but it's really a big issue right now across the country in different states and different levels.

And we did some [02:21:00] work in the state of Utah. We were there for probably about six or eight months and also in Wyoming. and trying to get the state legislature to at least bring it up to get it out of the committee, which is still working on.

Elizabeth Doty: Yeah, those procedural barriers. And then what about Bridge Alliance?

Francis Johnson: Bridge Alliance? A good thing about them. They're kind of the culmination of a lot of You know, different groups, and one of the things in working with them is there, you know, issues that are kind of the overall broad issues, they kind of pair us with different groups that are kind of like minded in issues.

Also, a lot of their new just forming groups that are become members of bridge Alliance. We, you know, kind of help them you know, get started and, and forward some of the issues and help them with some of this, their, their state traction and getting traction in certain states and certain issues.

Elizabeth Doty: Yeah, very good.

Allison, can I ask you to share what you're noticing from the chat or the pre question. Let's take it back to one of the pre questions we had from Vicki. I see you're still on the call. I know you had a question about mobilizing businesses to actually get corporations to support addressing pay to play lobbying.

Thank you. In particular, with all the news that's come out that the corporations made record profits. In 2021 over 2019 and, and how inflation is the big talk of the day, which seems it's kind [02:23:00] of artificial in, in in certain areas. And, and in the, back in the day, we could boycott. Or, you know, use our power as a consumer to try and move corporations a little bit.

But now you don't know who makes what. It's so hard to keep track of, you know, people making baby food and, and, and ammonia or, you know, whatever, everything's all combined. Do you have any tips on how How we can can urge the corporations to take a little bigger stand on addressing the pay to play and the money in politics in general, because it, it, it really you know, affects their ability to do business, but not just from opt to optical point, but from there, the more they have to spend on lobbying, the more they have to spend on donations because they're competing with other corporations as far as the, the, the competition piece.

Francis Johnson: One of the things that I think is going to come out.[02:24:00] with the supply chain issues that we have right now is and the fact that automobile makers are, they can only make limited amount of cars because we rely so much on foreign parts, primarily the chips. You know, in those vehicles that, that actually they need to operate on and Ford and Chevy that I've read, I don't, you know, don't, but I read it at good authority that they're now going to start manufacturing, they're going to start bringing a lot of that manufacturing back, you know, to this country.

Because it'll just show you if you have a cut off, we're dead in the water and, you know, the, the, the shortages, the supply chain shortages are hurting, you know, everyone and it's causing inflation and it's it's supply and demand. And it's just, it's a natural thing I think that it and hopefully that is things we start getting the [02:25:00] goods in and we start

manufacturing things in a year or so prices will go down. I think the, the, the government kind of needs to kind of stay out of that when, especially if you look at what happened to the oil. You know, peace right now, why we're paying the government got involved in that, cut things off and all of a sudden we're paying 1.50 more a gallon. Now the industry itself was really self supporting, you know, in that there were giving, there were, you know, gasoline was at a reasonable price. You know, one of the, the, the areas that we really need to understand, you know, in this is are the, the companies that are, you know, like you say, that are.

Doing the pay for play, you know, are they really make making the offering the right things to the consumers or they're really doing the same thing or are they're kind of pigeonhole because of what is the government regulation piece of it. And, you know, that's why we're saying, you know, how about a little less [02:26:00] of their thumb, you know, on industry.

Let that let the industry let the free enterprise you know, kind of thrive because it's, it's going to, it's number one, it's going to be lower prices, better competition, and also little less, you know, need for pay to play. You know, the reason I think what what pushes pay to play is because they're kind of pushed into it because they want to get something. And the only way they're going to get it is going through this particular politician or politicians itself. And if we kind of take that, you know, that Part of way where you won't have as much, you know, regulation, if you take the regulations and the reasons pay to place because there's a regulation and they're paying this person either to overlook regulation, change the regulation or whatever, that's going to be in favor of this company.

If we've got to get away from those things, I think there'll be less pay for play.[02:27:00]

Elizabeth Doty: I've posted here on the closing slide to go to takeback.org. Get to know what they're what they're doing, stay in touch, they have a good newsletter, very informative. You can also go to the Erb Institute's Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force website and contact us if you're interested in joining as an executive in a company and or to continue to attend these expert dialogues.

What would you suggest to them as a takeaway things that they could or should do to address pay to play or to to rebuild the country?

Francis Johnson: Well, I think you know, overall. We need to really start looking at smaller government. And I think you know, over the years, if you look at what government was when the question was 30 40 years ago, what was our government 40 years ago?

Look, what's our government now? And it's, it's It's like night and day. And as more government involvement has gotten in, you know, some good, most not so good. And it kind of fosters a lot of, you know, of what we're going through now. So, you know, I would just, you know, you know, push it, especially if you're in a political business or even on the corporate [02:29:00] side is to really kind of push for that small business.

And one of the things that we had a conversations with the chamber of commerce there and which is, you know, there they represent businesses and they were all in agreement that, you know, smaller government is, is, is not so much. They're asking to kind of just go, you know, freewheeling. But a little less regulations.

The individuals that are running the corporations are very smart people. They know what they're doing. They understand what it is they have. They're probably closer to the people

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than some of these elected officials are because they're the ones that are, you know, Doing the making the products and services that the everyday person, you know, needs and uses.

Let's try to push for smaller government. If you start, it's going to take time. It's not something overnight, but start looking at some of the regulations. And, you know, why do we have and get the, the politicians we have, you know, [02:30:00] in office now, and the ones that are looking to run in the future to run kind of on a platform of, you know, we need to ratchet back.

What we're doing here, the regulations in the government, because number one, it's going to cost less for the taxpayers. And that, you know, that's a key. And also it's going to foster, you know, more individuals, you know, when we get started getting more into full employment, you know, people are, you know, people are paying more taxes.

Which in terms going to help pay down this, this massive deficit that we have. And it's, you know, it's not so much you're saying the tax increases, it's, it's increasing the base who are actually paying the taxes, which will help pay down the deficit. These are the kinds of things that we need to do, and we need to push for, you know, in the upcoming years.

Elizabeth Doty: Thank you all for joining us today. And Francis, thank you so much for walking through so many facets of a really rich, you know, dynamic environment. Thank you for your work.

Francis Johnson: Well, thank you. It was a great, great pleasure to be [02:31:00] here.