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Pop quiz: We met with a Virginia senator about getting paid sick days for all workers. Which party do you think this person helps to lead?

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Question: Which political party does this lawmaker belong to?

Background:

We met with a powerful state senator (I happen to live in his district) to discuss legislation that would require employers to provide a few paid sick days for their employees yesterday. It ended up being a conversation but wouldn't have been if we hadn't insisted on getting a couple words in. He/she talked over us most of the half hour, didn't seem to be listening, and was reluctant to accept a fact sheet and articles on the topic including information about other what other states are doing.

While most high-paid workers receive paid sick leave as part of their compensation, many low-paid workers do not. Giving workers an incentive to go to work sick doesn't make a lot of sense, particularly two years of a pandemic.

As we tried to make our case, here are some points the senator made with emphasis:

- C'mon now. Low-wage workers don't vote. (It's true that disproportionately fewer low-income people vote, but does that mean we shouldn't represent their interests?)
- Most people without paid sick days are (pause) "immigrants."
- Hourly workers are fundamentally different than salaried workers (in response to an observation about the unfairness of managers at a local grocery chain getting paid sick days, while cashiers and other employees don't).

- A staffer concurred that there's no way to treat salaried and hourly employees equally with regard to employee benefits. That's a completely unreasonable expectation. (Even if we're talking about a standard protecting public health?)
- The owner of a successful restaurant chain told the senator that waiters there typically make \$85,000 a year. (Really?) Yes, and waiters that earn less than \$85,000 a year elsewhere should go to work there, the senator said repeatedly. (What about [waiters who happen to work at x, y, and z restaurants in your district?](#) ... Never heard of those places...What if we survey people working in them? No response ... let's talk about something else.)
- The successful restaurant entrepreneur also told the senator only about 7 waiters at his establishment were infected with Covid, and they all went home and got better (guess this was an argument that tipped employees who work in close contact with customers don't need sick days and society wouldn't benefit from their having any).
- Lots of waiters at other restaurants make a lot of money. In fact, the senator once dined at a resort (or maybe it was a winery) where meals cost \$1,500 and, therefore, tips would have to be hundreds of dollars!
- Requiring small employers to provide paid sick days would put many gas stations out of business. (Geez, couldn't they raise gas prices a couple of cents a gallon – or not at all if a business already provided paid sick days).

Observations:

In fairness, perhaps this seasoned politician was trying to throw cold water on the expectations of well-intentioned but politically naïve advocates trying to help the poor and powerless on behalf of organizations including an interfaith group. After all, do-gooders like these can be insufferable and flat out waste one's time.

However, as it turns out, the senator did say that, if pushed, she/he is willing to support a mandate for a couple paid sick days -- if small businesses are excluded.

So which party does he/she belong to? I'm not telling...but here's another clue. The animal representing that aggregate of souls doesn't have tusks. And it might have lost its kick. This experience left me open to choosing differently when I

vote next year despite the senator's years in office and achievements. The attitude and tone of voice were light years different from those of the candidate who knocked on our door years ago during an election.

Extra credit:

If pushed, members of both parties will say they represent the interests of low-wage workers. Would doing more to help these people, who come in a surprising variety of skin colors and ethnic backgrounds, increase their likelihood to vote? And, when they do vote, consider switching their allegiance to a political party that stood up for them and delivered tangible improvements to their lives?

Even if only half of these folks vote, they can make a difference in who gets to run things. Even in one of the wealthiest sections of the country.

This tale will end with a punchline from Yakov Smirnoff, the immigrant stand-up comic who rose to fame during the Reagan years. After being offered \$5,000 a week (cash!) to work as a driver in a role in the movie [Brewster's Millions](#), he shouts out: What a country! America, I love it!

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