



Spring 2005

## Running Uphill

IWU Magazine  
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### **Recommended Citation**

Magazine, IWU (2005) "Running Uphill," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss1/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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**Professor Tari Renner reflects on his campaign  
to unseat a veteran incumbent for Congress.**



At an “unvictory” celebration after the Nov. 2 election, Renner spoke to campaign staff, family, friends, and supporters. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

On Aug. 11, 2003, Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Political Science Tari Renner formally announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress in a four-city tour across Illinois’ 11th Congressional District. The day began with a live radio interview at 9 a.m., a press conference on the steps of the Old Courthouse in Bloomington at 10 a.m., a noon stop in Ottawa, another radio interview in Morris at 2:30 p.m., and a final press conference in Kankakee at 4 p.m. He managed to make it back to Bloomington in time to take his two sons, Max and Alex, to a seven o’clock showing of *Freaky Friday*, a movie they’d been “dying to see.” However, Renner’s day didn’t end until 10:15 that evening, when he completed his last press interview, via telephone, with the *Peoria Journal–Star*.

Thus began Renner’s 14-month, uphill marathon to defeat the veteran Republican incumbent, Rep. Jerry Weller. The race finally ended on Nov. 2, 2004, when Renner conceded — but the calm, determined look on his face as he spoke to supporters, family, and friends was hardly an expression of defeat. Although outspent by \$1 million, Renner won Republican-leaning McLean County and garnered almost 42 percent of the total vote.

A two-term McLean County Board member and chair of that board's justice committee, Renner is also well known in Central Illinois for his savvy television news analysis of both local and national politics. On the academic side, Renner holds a Ph.D. in political science from American University's School of Government and Public Administration, and his research and publications have focused on public-opinion polling, electoral behavior, election systems, and urban political structures. Joining Illinois Wesleyan's political science department in 1994, he has served as chair of that department and won the University's top teaching prize, the Pantagraph Award for Teaching Excellence, in 2002.



Among Renner's many stops along the campaign trail was a McLean County farm. *(Photo provided by McLean County Democratic Central)*

In his first extensive interview since concluding his campaign, Renner (who provided written answers) reflects on his run for Congress and how those experiences reflect on the current state of American campaign politics.

### **Why did you decide to run for Congress in the first place?**

That was a question I asked myself repeatedly over the course of the campaign. The answer is a combination of concern about the direction of the country and political process as well as intellectual intrigue. The 11th District of Illinois is the most evenly divided among Illinois' 19 districts. In 2000, Bush and Gore were virtually even in the 11th (50 percent for Bush to 48 percent for Gore). I believed that the current congressman, Jerry Weller, did not reflect the political diversity of the district since he voted with his party's president 100 percent of the time.

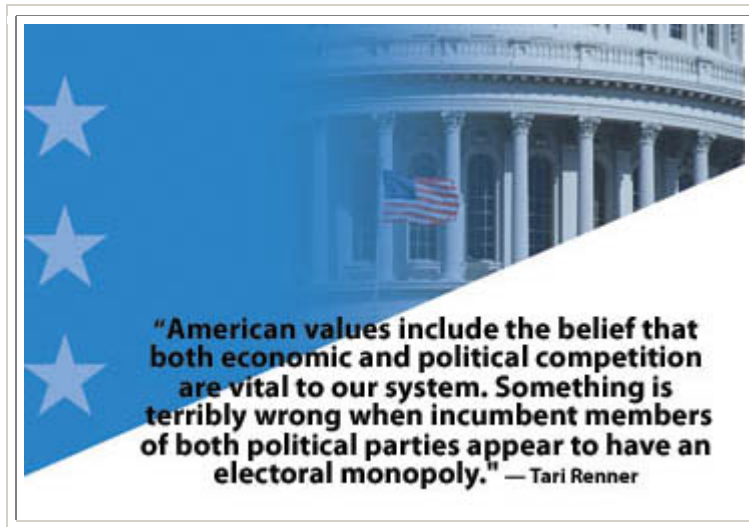
That said, I knew I would be facing a difficult challenge. In the U. S. House, incumbents rarely lose reelection (between 98 and 99 percent won in the previous four elections). But *when* they lose, they *do* so in districts like Illinois' 11th and when their voting records become ideologically rigid. In addition, the few challengers who do win tend to be either "self-funders" (millionaires) or so-called "experienced" challengers (those who currently hold a lower elective office or have run for Congress before and therefore already have a "base" of support). I fit into the latter but not the self-funding category.

### **What were your political credentials prior to entering this race?**

I had nearly 30 years of experience in working on campaigns for others, and have studied electoral politics both as a political scientist and media commentator. I had even run for elective office myself before, defeating a Republican incumbent for the McLean County Board in 1998 and running for reelection in 2002.

However, while I knew the scope of a congressional race in an eight-county district with over 4,200 square miles would be fundamentally different from a County Board campaign in part of a single county, nothing could really prepare me for how those differences would affect my life on a daily basis for the 15 month-duration of this campaign.

## Had you decided on a top priority when you launched your campaign?



The first primary task was to build name recognition and support among what political scientists call the “activist public.” These are the most active segment of voters who include the county party chairs, precinct committee people, local community activists, and labor leaders as well as current and former officeholders. This was particularly important outside of McLean County. I spent the three months before the formal announcement and a majority of my time through the end of 2003 appealing to these activists throughout

the district.

Our campaign’s biggest early break, however, came with the endorsement and financial contributions from Illinois’ senior U. S. Senator, Dick Durbin. This is one of the many points in the campaign where IWU’s alumni made an incredible difference. I had four former political science students working in the Senator’s office, including one who had been with him for nearly 10 years (since he served in the House). I am sure their promotion of my candidacy is why Durbin’s office contacted me to set up a meeting. After a two-hour meeting with the Senator he agreed to support me in any way he could. Within a week he personally came to the Hansen Student Center for a public rally.

This gave us a major boost statewide and in Washington. It also helped that one of our alums worked for the *National Journal Hotline* (the main inside-the-Beltway Web site for political junkies). He insured that the Durbin endorsement and all other Renner campaign news made it into the daily *Hotline* updates.

The Durbin announcement came on the heels of a fund-raiser sponsored by some very prominent Will County Democrats — including former Congressman George Sangmeister, who held the 11th district seat before Weller won it in 1994. The support of these important political leaders helped give us critical momentum at year’s end. It led to a unanimous endorsement by the Will County Democratic organization and the statewide AFL-CIO in January. These endorsements, in turn, were helpful in leveraging additional support from other groups and individuals across the district as well as in Chicago, Springfield, and Washington. Our campaign began to generate a significant political buzz among journalists, political leaders, activists, and potential donors. If Durbin and others are willing to stick their necks out to support this guy, he must have a chance and “have something on the ball.”

**Were there times when the grind of running a campaign really got to you, physically or**

## mentally?

There was one distinct psychological slump, in the months following the March primary. I had been “on the trail” for a year at this point and had another six months in front of me. I began to feel as if nothing was good enough. The campaign itself was a black hole of time, and I felt constant pressure as well-intentioned people throughout the district would tell me about the additional things that needed to be done. At the same time, I felt as though I was neglecting other parts of my life. There was virtually no time for me to spend time with my friends and colleagues — except to invite them to fund-raisers for a “sound bite” conversation or two.

The events of June helped pull me out of my campaign “burnout” phase. Our fund-raising began to pick up — especially in the Chicago area. Democratic Leadership for the 21st Century, a Democratic reform organization, sponsored a highly successful fund-raiser for us in the city. We moved into a new, comparatively spacious, and highly visible headquarters in downtown Bloomington. The physical space helped create a dramatically different campaign. We began our massive direct phone banking and other activities, since a large number of volunteers could now work amid the full-time staff. Many more people began stopping by to visit or volunteer. We had a large number of new full- and part-time summer interns come aboard. Our organization had come alive!



## **The campaign was shaken up with the announcement of your opponent’s impending nuptials. Can you explain what happened, from your perspective, and how it affected your campaign?**

On July 7, Congressman Weller announced his engagement to Zury Rios Montt — the key political operative in parliament and daughter of a former Guatemalan dictator (with a very violent history, to put it charitably). Our campaign immediately sent out a press release calling on the congressman to resign from the Western Hemispheric Subcommittee on which he served to prevent any possible conflicts of interest. Several newspapers across the district urged him to do the same. Almost immediately, there was national and international coverage of the controversy. The New York Times sent their Central American correspondent to Bloomington for a direct interview. As a result, other papers throughout the country covered the story. I even had several interviews with the Guatemalan press — including *Good Morning Guatemala*.

In the short run, the primary impact of this situation was to “shake up” the race. The media got used to covering our campaign and no one could be sure how it might affect voters’ attitudes. Not only did potential donors begin returning our phone calls but many officials contacted us to offer their support and advice.

The downside, from our perspective, was that it never seemed to fade from the media’s stories on

our campaign. Even in our final encounter six days before the election, many journalists reported how “surprising” it was that the Rios Montt controversy didn’t come up. So, in the long run, the situation muddled our campaign’s central message: that we represented a reform alternative to an incumbent who was out of touch and had become the captive of powerful special interests.

**Your opponent often seemed to refer to your academic background as though it were a negative. How did you respond?**

Throughout the campaign, the incumbent never failed to refer to me as “the Professor.” This was a less than subtle attempt to imply that I was an out-of-touch, pointy-headed academic. Therefore, in my speeches and interviews, I tried to include some background information which made it clear that I had a life and experience outside of the “academic bubble.” Some examples I included were the fact that I had lived in a single-parent household on welfare as a child, and had worked for the FBI, the EPA, and the International City/County Management Association.

Anecdotal evidence on the trail suggested that the congressman’s constant references may have been a double-edged sword. In a brief stop at a Joliet convenience store the day after a televised joint appearance, for example, two women behind the counter asked me: “Aren’t you running for something?” and “Didn’t I see you on television yesterday morning?” After introducing myself, one asked me: “Didn’t it bother you that he kept referring to you as ‘the Professor’ because it really bothered me?” Immediately, the other woman offered: “Yeah, he (Weller) sounded like Gilligan in *Gilligan’s Island*.”

**Even though the odds were against you, toward the end of the campaign you seemed poised for an upset. Did it feel that way to you?**



Renner hosted a fund-raiser in Bloomington with Barack Obama, who later won his bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Our campaign had many reasons to believe that we were within striking distance of the incumbent in the last few weeks. To varying degrees, both our polls and Weller’s showed the gap closing. We had several successful and well publicized fund-raisers, including one with U.S. Senate candidate (and eventual winner) Barack Obama in downtown Bloomington. We received some unexpected endorsements from national organizations and the local press. *The Pantagraph* and the *Peoria Journal-Star* were particularly important since they endorsed Republican George Bush for President and Democrat Tari Renner for U. S. Congress.

Exactly two weeks out from the election, the incumbent’s behavior totally changed. Mr. Weller showed up at candidate forums rather than sending surrogates. He agreed to a joint televised appearance on NBC Chicago’s *City Desk* and, most importantly, began mentioning me by name in ads (both radio and direct mail). “The Professor” was now “Professor Tari Renner.”

The first of the two waves of attack ads focused upon Social Security, claiming that I wanted to raise taxes and the retirement age. The second wave (during the last seven days) claimed I was for the legalization of illicit drugs. Somebody who operated a drug-legalization Web site sent us \$200 and urged anyone who lived in our district to vote against the incumbent. We returned the contribution long before it was discovered by our opponent, but he seized the opportunity.

Based upon responses to our phone banking operation, the second wave of attacks was far more effective than the first. Unfortunately, we had no opportunity to respond with paid ads to the attack since our funds were virtually all committed by the last few days of the campaign. We encountered, firsthand, the incredible power of money in “getting your message out.” So, the incumbent not only got in the proverbial last word but the last paragraph and, of course, none of those accusations was actually true.

In the end we were outspent by a million dollars (\$1,300,00 to \$300,000) and the incumbent won by 58.7 percent to 41.3 percent of the votes cast. My only “consolation prize” was winning McLean County with 52.8 percent, despite the fact that it was strongly Republican in the presidential contest. The last-minute attack ads didn’t seem to be effective where I was best known.

### **What did this experience as a candidate add to your knowledge about campaign politics in America?**

The “big” political lessons I learned firsthand in this election were not new to me: the power of money and incumbency; a challenger’s continued struggle for legitimacy, money, media coverage and momentum. But my perspective on them changed after living with them over the 500-day campaign. It’s easier for me to see now precisely why so many very gifted people don’t want to enter the political process.

The experience also has given me a renewed commitment to changing our system of campaign finance. Aside from the few Texas representatives who were redistricted out of their seats, only three incumbent House members lost across the country (out of nearly 400 who sought reelection). American values include the belief that both economic and political competition are vital to our system. Something is terribly wrong, therefore, when incumbent members of both political parties appear to have an electoral monopoly.

On a more personal side, this campaign also taught me some important lessons. I will be forever grateful for the incredibly generous financial and emotional support given by those close to me. When virtually every minute of your life gets scheduled for so long, you really come to appreciate special moments. Hopefully, I will never again



Campaign manager Matt Glavin '01 and finance director Gretchen Grabowski '03 (left) look on as Renner speaks. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

take for granted the time I spend with my sons, friends, and colleagues.

I want to also mention how much support from the Illinois Wesleyan community has meant to me. The help and encouragement I received from students, fellow faculty members, and alumni really kept my spirits up and the campaign moving forward. And, of course, I'm exceptionally grateful to my paid campaign staff, all of whom were IWU alumni: Matt Glavin '01, Gretchen Grabowski '03, Jake Posey '99, John Rapp '03, and Josh Worell '04.

Anyone who's worked on the inside of a campaign knows the hours and the sacrifice to one's personal life that's involved. The upside was the bonds that formed among us as we worked toward a common goal. While we obviously would have preferred winning, in the end I think what mattered most to all of us was that we had fought hard and honorably for a cause we believed in. David didn't beat Goliath on this particular occasion, but you live to fight another day.

**Speaking of which, at this point have you even considered the possibility of running for Congress again?**

I've been encouraged by many supporters throughout the district to consider running again in 2006. One of the three successful challengers in 2004 was someone who received 42 percent of the vote the first time and used that momentum to defeat the incumbent the second time around. So, yes, I would consider running for Congress again — but, unlike California's governor, I doubt "I'll be back" anytime soon.