On Campus

Rewired: Tim Wu’s Fantastic Foray

What happens when a leading tech theorist absorbs the rays of electoral politics?

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|
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Tim Wu (Mike Groll / AP)

I think that we need regular people to go into politics. By regular I mean people who are not creatures. - Tim Wu, August 14, 2014

JUNE 16. Tim Wu, a Columbia law professor, stood at a wooden lectern inside the state capitol in Albany. He was about to embark on a whole new trip. He hadn't really planned it. A month earlier, when he'd written, in the *New Yorker*, of "the coming war," he certainly hadn't been talking about *this*. Rather, he was referring to an issue he knew better than anyone, and whose name he'd invented: net neutrality.

It was the principle to which Wu had devoted much of his career: that Internet service providers should treat all traffic equally (no high-speed lanes for big companies, no monopolistic control of the wires, no blocking of legal content). But now the vision of an open Internet was imperiled: on May 15, the Federal Communications Commission proposed new Internet rules whose language, according to Wu, would permit broadband carriers like Comcast, Verizon, and Time Warner to charge websites "a payola payment to reach customers through a 'fast lane.'" Such a system, Wu contended, would, among other things, hurt small businesses, reduce the freedom of consumers, and discourage innovation. The FCC was accepting public comments on the proposed rules until September 15.

Yet Wu, dressed this June day in a white shirt, black jacket, and striped tie, was preparing for a different fight. The woman beside him at the lectern, wearing a lemon-chiffon skirt and jacket and a pearl necklace, was Zephyr Teachout, a Yale-educated Fordham University law professor. Teachout, virtually unknown in New York politics, had come to Albany to announce her bid to unseat Governor Andrew Cuomo in a Democratic primary to be held on September 9. Wu was her running mate, vying to become lieutenant governor, or "LG," a largely ceremonial position that Wu wanted to transform into one of public advocacy.

"If New York gives us a chance to govern," Teachout told the group of reporters on hand, "we will build an economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy and well-connected." The state, she said, was "more unequal than at any time since the plutocratic era," reflecting a "politics *of* the few, *by* the few."

Wu, whose governmental experience included a post as senior adviser to the Federal Trade Commission in 2011, where he worked on tech-sector antitrust and privacy issues, had, just a week earlier, envisioned a different summer for himself. He would go sailing and fishing. He would work on net neutrality, of course, and also on his new book, called *Your Attention, Please*, whose premise was that human attention is the twenty-first century's most important resource. Wu had earned a $200,000

advance, an indication of the success of his 2010 book, *The Master Switch*, a revelatory history of tech monopolies that showed how communication innovations pass from periods of openness and decentralization to periods of consolidation and control — what Wu called “the Cycle,” and whose patterns he saw in politics.

Now those summer plans would be shelved. The book would go to the back burner. Net neutrality would have to share elbow room with New York State education, immigration, the environment, and a particular cable merger. There would be no sailing. And the fish in the Hudson could breathe easier: Wu had others to fry. Though he and Teachout faced monumental odds against a powerful incumbent, they had a plan. They would raise their money not from a few large donors, but from a lot of small ones. They would speak candidly, fearlessly. They would call for debates. And who knew what the news cycle might have in store?

“We’re underdogs,” Wu told the *Washington Post*, “but we think we have a chance.”

JULY 22. The Peruvian Independence Day celebration at the Elmhurst–Jackson Heights Senior Center in Queens was not an occasion for wonkiness. A hundred Spanish-speaking citizens of assorted Latin American heritages sat at round, blue-draped tables with centerpieces of balloons of red and white, Peru’s national colors. Women in blouses of turquoise and crimson. Men in flowered shirts. There would be dancing soon.

Tim Wu’s message was brief. “All I want to say is, I am the son of immigrants,” he said into a handheld microphone from the front of the room. “My name is Wu, I am the son of immigrants, and I believe that New York should always remain a place that welcomes immigrants and treats them with respect and dignity, and makes New York a place where everyone feels at home.”

Moments earlier, Teachout had led the seniors in a recitation of her first name, which had confounded some of the ladies at the front tables. Then she shared a slice of her biography — large, tight-knit family from a small town — and reminded everyone that the Statue of Liberty was a woman. Wu, standing nearby in a black suit, clapped hard at Teachout’s applause lines.

He was getting the hang of this politicking stuff. The past month had been a blur of community centers, farmers’ markets, local political clubs, places of worship. That morning he’d spoken Mandarin at a Chinatown church. Now, in Queens, he and

Teachout were tapping into the frustration in immigrant communities over the state legislature's failure, in March, to pass the DREAM Act, which would have opened tuition aid to undocumented immigrant students.

"I am running on a pro-immigrant platform in order to see that we're all treated with dignity," Wu told the seniors.



Net-neutrality rally, Washington, DC. Photo: The Washington Post

Afterward, Wu spoke to a reporter about his other campaign themes. He talked about money in politics, and what he saw as the anti-progressive record of his opponent, Democrat Kathy Hochul, a former Buffalo congresswoman from a conservative district who had been handpicked by Cuomo. (In New York, the governor and LG run separately in the primaries.) But no matter the topic, the bird of conversation always wheeled back to the nest of concentrated power. This thread ran through Wu's papers, articles, and books, his class in antitrust law, and in his frequent allusions to Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party and the depredations of consolidated wealth as articulated by Woodrow Wilson and Louis Brandeis. His pet

campaign issue — the Comcast–Time Warner cable merger — was a case study of what ailed the republic. And as with many problems, the remedy was already on the books, if only elected officials would apply it.

“States can block a merger if they think it’s not good for the people,” Wu said, referring to the powers of the New York State Public Service Commission, which was to announce its decision on the merger in October. “States should have special concern for mergers that involve life’s necessities, like health care and telecom, because these affect their citizens. Telecom is clearly a utility. We need to talk openly about having an electric bill, a food bill, and an information bill. Food, housing, information, transportation, energy — these are the basics.” Wu compared the average Time Warner bill of $105 to the average Comcast bill of $156 and warned of a price hike that would cost New York cable customers $1.6 billion per year, should the merger go through. “The executive vice president of Comcast said prices will continue to rise,” said Wu. “On the other side, he says, ‘We’ll bring in innovative services.’ What I think people care about is prices. When they want excitement and innovation, they turn to the Internet, not the cable company. There’s nothing in this merger that’s of public interest, so the state should block it.”

The merger had been on Wu’s radar long before he entered the LG race — he wrote an article for the *New Yorker* website last February called “The Real Problem with the Comcast Merger” — and as a policy issue it flowed nicely into his conception of the LG as a position that “uses the power of the office to shine attention on important things that aren’t in the public consciousness.” As president of the state senate, the LG has a legislative function, casting the tiebreaking vote, but Wu saw an expanded, creative role. “He or she should be a policy entrepreneur, constantly trying to figure out what policies would make New York better, thinking fresh about some very old problems, and moving the entire state apparatus in the direction of policy entrepreneurship.”

Outside the Elmhurst senior center, Wu and Teachout caught a cab to their next event. Later, they would head up to Kingston to speak to the Ulster County Democratic Women, never imagining that, by the next morning, their campaign would shift into a whole other gear.

JULY 23. The streets of Manhattan were clogged with cars, but Tim Wu bypassed the gridlock. Astride his black 1971 Raleigh racer, Wu, wearing a dark suit and

helmet, pedaled past luxury high-rises, banks, chain stores, and FOR RENT signs in the windows of small businesses. On this hot day, Wu had the wind at his back.

That morning, the *New York Times*, on its home page, ran a long exposé titled "Cuomo's Office Hobbled Ethics Inquiries by Moreland Commission." The Moreland Commission was an anti-corruption panel convened by Cuomo in July 2013 and then abruptly disbanded the following March after the governor struck an ethics deal with the legislature. The *Times* revealed possible interference by Cuomo's office in the panel's probe into the campaign-finance activities of the governor's allies, and reported that Preet Bharara '93LAW, the US attorney for the Southern District of New York known for his aggressive prosecutions of insider traders and terrorists, was investigating the commission's shutdown.

The story in the *Times* was not a shock to Wu — the Moreland affair had been percolating for months — but he understood that political manna had fallen. This development was all the more timely in that the Cuomo campaign had, the day before, initiated court proceedings to contest Teachout's residency status. Though the outcome of the case was never in doubt, Teachout's shoestring campaign (her war chest amounted to about 1 percent of Cuomo's $32 million) still had to cover the legal costs, which it did through crowdfunding. It was the sort of tactic Wu had in mind whenever he compared monopolistic companies to entrenched politicians: "Both do great stuff for a while, but then there's a turning point when a politician or a company becomes less interested in doing good things, or in improving its product, and starts to think it needs to destroy its competitors, or create enormous barriers to ever being challenged."

Wu rode his Raleigh up to Teachout–Wu's garment-district headquarters on Seventh Avenue. The campaign had made camp in four small, bare-bones offices of generic desks, forlorn phone jacks, and fire-resistant carpet. In one of them, Nona Farahnik '12LAW, Wu's former student and teaching assistant, and now his campaign manager, was on her laptop monitoring the fallout from the *Times* story. Another room contained a desk, a chair, and a placard of Teachout and Wu standing on a rooftop against the Midtown skyline.

Wu, a fan of science fiction and Kafka, might have appreciated these nondescript rooms as an apt setting for some secret transformation. And as the son of scientists, and as a heavy analytical thinker, he could hardly have entered politics without the curiosity of the laboratory savant sipping a brew of known effects, to see what it

would do to *him*.

He was scheduled to meet with tech entrepreneur and liberal political mover Bill Samuels in an hour, to get some advice.

“I’m probably not going to come with you, so I can help blast things out,” Farahnik told him. As Wu began to suggest that it would be good for her to meet Samuels, Farahnik said, “Actually, I think I’ll come with you. The other thing,” she said, “is that there might be a rally at four p.m. in front of the legislative offices. Maybe you could stop by before dinner. You should, if it happens.”

AUGUST 14. The synth-pop anthem “Anything Could Happen” by Ellie Goulding shook the American-flag-draped wall and the bookcases of the Greenwich Village duplex where Tim Wu had come to speak. About thirty-five people filled the living room and the small backyard. Many of them, like John Love ’13LAW, who lived there, were Wu’s recent students, and had paid sixty dollars to eat hummus, drink beer and wine, and hear the professor. The bookcases contained red-bound law books, *The World Atlas of Wine*, a collection of *Onion* spoofs, and, on display, a copy of *The Master Switch*.

Wu, chatting with Farahnik and Andrew Reich ’13LAW, had just blown in from Christopher Street, two blocks away. There, he had stood in a meeting room of the Village Independent Democrats, an old and raucous neighborhood political club, some of whose members could recall when a young Ed Koch tried to become club president back in ’60. The VID had endorsed Kathy Hochul for LG, but that was before Wu entered the race. Tonight they were taking a re-vote, and Wu had showed up to personally make his case. “We’re in a situation where there are a lack of checks and balances in the Albany system,” he’d told the club. “I believe America, and the state, works best when we have critical voices, when we have people in office whose job is not absolute loyalty, but to question when questions need to be asked. I ask tough questions, I seek the truth, and I’m not easily cowed.” Wu was asked to leave before the club took its vote.

More people arrived at the duplex. Everyone who knew Wu was eager to talk about him. Reich, an associate at the firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, had known about Wu’s work on net neutrality, and as a law student had sought out Wu’s telecom class. “He teaches from the seats and not from the lectern,” Reich said. “He

doesn’t want to just lecture to you. He wants to teach you interesting things, and then he wants to have a discussion about it. That was so beneficial when I was learning this area of the law. He made me passionate about it.” Reich was Wu’s research assistant for a paper that asked if computer communications could claim First Amendment protection. “I got to see how he thinks,” said Reich. “If I thought he was smart before, I *really* thought he was smart after.”

“Not only is he brilliant,” said Kathleen Farley, a Columbia law student and Wu volunteer, “he’s good at bringing out the brilliance of other people.”

Farahnik, standing behind the sofa, got a phone call. It was a Wu staffer on Christopher Street. Farahnik repeated the message to the room: the Village Independent Democrats had voted to withdraw their Hochul endorsement and back Wu.

Cheers went up. In the political winds of a primary, when it was the obsessives who turned out at the polls, the VID’s stamp was another gust to the good.

Minutes later, Farahnik took the floor and introduced the man whom, before she took a leave of absence from her job at Latham & Watkins to run his campaign, she had called Professor Wu. “Tim has no message discipline and is not interested in learning any,” Farahnik said. “He answers questions with an honesty you don’t typically see in political life.” This was perhaps a nice way of calling someone a loose cannon, but if Wu at the microphones had ever made his staffers hold their breath, it was because, as Wu often said, “If you say something stupid, you can destroy your career in one sentence” — and “stupid” in this sense did not preclude honesty or intelligence. “It’s really interesting and exciting,” Farahnik said, “that Tim is running for a position that has not meant anything to the state. Basically, the lieutenant governor serves as a ribbon cutter. For the first time, we have somebody who’s brilliant and who wants to put some policy into action. He’s not scared of much, except scorpions.”

Wu, known for showman’s flair in the lecture hall, stepped up onto a folding chair, a Magic Hat pale ale effervescing in his fist. “It’s not a speech unless you’re standing, right?” The guests laughed and gathered round. “I’ve said to a lot of people: my brain is becoming rewired by doing politics,” said Wu. “One thing that’s happened is that I’ve become nicer and friendlier and more extroverted. When you spend a lot of time writing, you kind of start to hate people. Ever notice that writers are really

cranky, difficult people? It's because they spend all their time in isolation. Politics is the opposite: you spend all your time *with* people, and it's started to change my personality. One of the ways that politicians' personalities change is that they start thinking about donors a *lot*. As someone once said, money is the mother's milk of politics. So people think about their positions, and one part of their brain asks, 'What's the right answer?' and the other part asks, 'How will this work with donors?' When you start thinking like that, that is the dark path. Where does the path of darkness start? It starts when you think, 'Which policy issues should I adopt because they make it easier to fundraise?' You can see it's tempting. But that is the path. And I already feel it. I feel like I'm resisting it, but I feel it. This is where it all starts inside the minds of candidates: when they decide, 'I'm not going to take that position, because it might make my donors angry.'"

Wu had been riding this theme. Earlier that night, in front of a tech crowd in the Flatiron District, he'd said, "Money is just the wrong value. When you're always thinking, 'What is this going to mean for my donors, what is this going to mean for my ability to raise money' — when *that* is your compass, where the fuck is that going to lead you?"

Now, atop a chair and full of the beer of grassroots endorsement, he said, "Let me tell you how I'm going to win the lieutenant governor race."

His advantage, he said, was that he would be the first Asian-American in New York history to hold statewide office, and that support for his campaign was "enormous" in the Chinese-American community (he had been in Flushing that afternoon, playing table tennis at a senior center). Then there was the enthusiasm of young Democrats excited about a candidate that "looks more like them," though Wu admitted he wasn't *that* young (he is forty-two). But mostly, he said, his positions were more aligned with the average voter than those of Hochul, who, Wu liked to point out, had received an "A" rating from the NRA and had voted to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. "The real challenge for us," Wu said, "is getting the minimal amount of name recognition so that people know that Wu is the noncorrupt, clean alternative — I sound like a gasoline — the progressive alternative to the usual Albany bullshit."

He also felt he enjoyed a psychological edge. "If I lose this election, I go back to the best job in the world," said Wu, a tenured, popular, well-paid professor. "So I feel like I run with a certain degree of fearlessness." But Wu, aloft on the chair, was only

pointing out that there was a net beneath him. He had no intention of falling. “I have this incredible confidence,” he said, “that we’re going to pull this off.”

AUGUST 27. The air conditioning on the wood-paneled tour bus had petered out somewhere past Goshen, but you’d never have known it from looking at Zephyr Teachout. The candidate running ninety degrees uphill to become the state’s first female governor was the only passenger who didn’t seem to be sweating. Wearing a black dress, electric-blue blazer, and a pearl necklace, she chatted and laughed with staffers and reporters. She had good reason to be upbeat. That morning, the *Times* had surprised readers by declining to endorse Cuomo, for “his failure on ethics reform”; and even though it had declined to endorse Teachout, either, for her want of “the breadth of interests and experience needed” to govern New York, Teachout counted this as a victory. The paper had yet to weigh in on the lieutenant governor race, but the rebuke of Cuomo was clear.

The bus was equipped with a leather wraparound couch, two leather chairs, a table with a printer, a telephone, a temperature gauge that was by now an object of derision, and a kitchen sink. Aides communed with their smartphones while a two-person film crew that had been documenting the campaign kept the camera rolling. In one of the chairs, Conor Skelding ’14CC, a thorn-sharp reporter who’d been covering the campaign for the political news website *Capital New York*, tapped at his laptop.



Teachout-Wu press conference, Brooklyn. Photo: Bebeto Matthews / AP / Corbis

The bus stopped near the Pennsylvania border and picked up some passengers, including Ray Kemble, a bandanna-wearing, gray-bearded mechanic from Dimock, Pennsylvania, who had worked hauling wastewater from hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, and then quit after a gas company drilled near his house and polluted his drinking water with methane (Kemble carried a plastic jug of liquid the color of flat Budweiser that he said came from his tap). He was joined by “Brother Lee” McCaslin of Bath, New York, a soft-spoken but talkative member of the Ottawa Nation who called himself the best gas driller in America. These men claimed to have seen the toxic effects of fracking on workers, residents, farm animals, and drinking water. They sat with Teachout in the back of the bus, where the candidate, who had made a ban on fracking central to her platform, spent an hour asking questions and patiently listening, impervious to the wilting heat.

Wu, at the front of the bus, had barely loosened his tie. He, too, opposed fracking (the bus, whose first stop had been an Orange County nursing home that the county executive wanted to privatize, was heading to a fracking site in Montrose, Pennsylvania), calling it a “step back for civilization” (clean drinking water being the great advance). Nor did he see fracking as a real solution for depressed upstate communities: resource-extraction economies, he said, were “ultimately a dead end.”

This bus trip was billed as the “Whistleblower Tour,” aimed at calling attention to Albany corruption. But the candidates were focused less on illegal corruption than on the legal variety — “when public officials aren’t serving the interests of all New Yorkers, but doing the bidding of private interests,” as Teachout had put it at the tour’s kickoff that morning on West 57th Street. There, across from Carnegie Hall, the candidates had stood in front of the tallest residential building in the Western Hemisphere — best known for the dangling crane that had caused evacuations during Hurricane Sandy, for the giant finger of a shadow it now extended over Central Park, and for its $90 million penthouse — and spoke of how the developer had donated $100,000 to Cuomo’s campaign in 2013 and received a $35 million tax break that was buried in a bill signed by the governor.

The bus pulled over on a country road. Not many people get to see a fracking site close up. This one, downslope from the roadside and carved out of the rolling green farmland that surrounded it, was five or six football fields big, a flat concrete-colored

slab spiked with a drilling rig and populated with trucks, storage tanks, trailers. Wu stood on the ravine and watched for a few minutes, remarking to Kemble that the workers didn't seem to be wearing any protection from possible contaminants.

Back on the bus, Wu did another phone interview. "Concentrated wealth is dangerous to the moral fabric of our society ... politics are too important to leave to career politicians ..." It was only later that afternoon, when the bus reached Binghamton, that Wu got a chance to really connect with voters.

Inside the Cyber Café West on Main Street, a homey college dive with sofas, beer signs, and, despite the name, a pre-Internet aesthetic, Wu sat in a cushioned chair at a low coffee table with six or seven middle-aged locals and told his story.

His parents were immigrants. Immigrant immunologists. His father was from Taiwan. His mother was from England. Dad studied T cells, Mom studied B cells. They met in Toronto. Nomads, Wu called them. They moved to Berkeley, California, then to Washington, DC, where Wu was born. His father became ill, and the family moved back to Canada. Wu was eight when his father passed away. His mother took him and his younger brother to Switzerland, then back to Toronto, where Wu was editor of his high-school paper. He was supposed to be a scientist — all his uncles were PhDs in science or MDs, a tradition that Wu was expected to follow. But Wu felt he had more talent for writing.

Writing and computers. He and his brother were "complete geeks," Wu liked to say, obsessed with the Apple II that their mother had brought home, fatefully, in 1982. The brothers would take it apart, plug stuff into it. They also wrote computer games. Still, when Wu got to college at McGill, he majored in biochemistry. "I found the laboratory scary," he said. "There was radiation around, and if you made one mistake you might contaminate everybody. One time I contaminated part of the lab — it was like Spider-Man or something. Geiger counters beeping. It was a little nerve-racking." After college, Wu decided to go to law school — "I was rebelling, I guess."



Wu and Teachout campaigning, Union Square. Photo: Demotix / Andy Katz

At Harvard Law, the apostate had no plan. One day, he wandered into the classroom of a young professor named Lawrence Lessig. The class was called The Law of Cyberspace. Wu took the class, and it changed his life. “This intersection of the law and the Internet — now *this* was interesting,” he said. “I knew computers as well as anyone, but nobody knew the law stuff. It was 1996, ’97, right at the beginning. I thought, ‘This is red-hot.’” He became Lessig’s research assistant. Lessig helped Wu get a clerkship with Seventh Circuit judge and scholar Richard Posner. Wu graduated from law school in 1998, and a year later he clerked for Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer. Then, in 2000, he went to Silicon Valley to make money — just in time for the *pop!* of the dot-com bubble. Wu returned east after two years. From 2002 to 2004 he was an associate professor of law at the University of Virginia,

where he wrote his landmark 2003 paper “Network Neutrality, Broadband Discrimination.” He held visiting professorships at Columbia, Stanford, and the University of Chicago before coming to Columbia in 2006 for a tenure-track position at the age of thirty-four. That year, he published his first book, written with Harvard law professor Jack Goldsmith, called *Who Controls the Internet?*

After an hour, Wu had to take off for Albany, where he was scheduled to release a dossier on Hochul’s environmental record the next day at the capitol. That night, as Wu ate a late dinner at a Thai restaurant in Albany after his five-hundred-mile day, the *New York Times*, in its online edition, ran a short headline on its opinion page, which hard-copy readers would see in the morning: *Timothy Wu for Lieutenant Governor*.

SEPTEMBER 3. In this political game, the *Times* endorsement shook up the board. Later, Wu would recall that the momentum had “exploded” — what Teachout called “Wu-mentum.” The *Times* had criticized Hochul on her votes against Obamacare and her record on immigration and the environment, and praised Wu’s public-advocacy notion of the office. “Although he lacks time in politics,” wrote the editors, “Mr. Wu has an impressive record in the legal field, particularly in Internet law and policy.”

It was a huge boon for Wu, but the Cuomo campaign continued to not mention the candidates by name or agree to a debate. (The local cable news network NY1 had invited the candidates to a televised debate on September 2. Teachout–Wu accepted; Cuomo– Hochul did not.) This was frustrating. Wu had been acquiring skills and was eager to deploy them. He’d learned to talk on television — not the easy way he’d talked as a net-neutrality expert on *The Colbert Report* or on *Charlie Rose*, but in a rapid-response style that called for drastic nimbleness. He’d learned how to debate through reporters, making statements that the press would then bring up to the other side. He’d gotten better at distilling complex messages, and was always refining his stump work, the variations of cadence, body language, and eye contact that came less naturally to him than it did to Teachout. He loved to talk, working out ideas on the fly into proffered voice recorders, while cultivating, on the stump, a near-firebrand style whose textures he evaluated even as he spoke (during one speech, he heard an off note in a verbal gambit, and chuckled discreetly to himself). Sometimes, mid-rumination, his eyes would close lightly, the eyelids fluttering as if waves of thought were passing just behind them. He’d clasp his hands together, interlock his fingers, pace pedagogically, bow his head during pauses, rock

on the balls of his feet, step backward and forward, jam his hands into his pockets.

On the morning of September 3, Mark Ruffalo, the movie actor, Sullivan County resident, and anti-fracking activist, stood on the steps of the Tweed Courthouse in Lower Manhattan, around the corner from City Hall. Wu and Teachout were beside him. It was among the campaign's sexier events — Ruffalo had pop-cultural appeal, and tourists were stopping to aim their iPhones — but the *Times*-powered Wu-mentum was about to meet another force, one that Wu had not foreseen.

First, some background. The Working Families Party (WFP) is a small but influential New York political party formed in 1998 by progressive activists and labor unions. The party had no great love for Cuomo, and many members supported the newcomer Teachout, a scholar of political corruption, for governor. But in late May, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio '87SIPA met with the party's leadership and brokered a deal: the WFP would endorse Cuomo, and in exchange, as reported in the *Daily News*, Cuomo would fight for a Democratic-majority state senate, a minimum-wage hike, the DREAM Act, and public campaign funding. Many in the WFP were angered. Among them was Mike Boland, the party's field director, who quit to become Teachout's campaign manager.

It was Boland who told Teachout to think different in her search for a running mate. He told her: "Think Internet." The answer, Teachout later told *Columbia Magazine*, was "obvious." She had met Tim Wu at an Internet conference in Hungary in 2006. They hit it off, wrote a paper together, and stayed in touch periodically. When Teachout called Wu in June and asked him to be her running mate, Wu jumped at it. "The secret about Tim — and there are a lot of non-secrets, like his brilliance, his affability — is that he has extraordinary drive," Teachout said. "He has a relaxed demeanor, but he is deeply driven. It was one of the reasons I picked him. There's all the external bio stuff, but if you're going to do something like this, you need someone who is completely motivated, and Tim always has been."

Ruffalo, on the courthouse steps, praised Wu and Teachout for their stance on fracking. Behind Ruffalo, members of the Sierra Club raised their banner. To his right, Ray Kemble held a jug of fluid that on this day was a bright Gatorade yellow. Ruffalo said, "It's an honor to be here with Zephyr and Tim and to support the vision that they have for our beloved state, whether we're talking about public education, open democracy, ethics, or of course the environment."

But while Ruffalo was calling the candidates “the most exciting thing happening in state politics,” a counter-narrative was unfolding around the corner in City Hall Park. There, the press, in heavier numbers, was assembling, waiting for the mayor to make an announcement. At the Ruffalo event, a reporter asked Wu what he thought of the mayor’s move. “I support Mayor de Blasio in many areas of policy,” Wu said, “but I think he has made a serious mistake.” Ruffalo offered his own view. “It’s pretty amazing and really shocking,” he said, “that two blocks from here, one of the great liberal politicians in the United States is actually going to be endorsing Hochul. But he made a commitment to support that ticket a while ago, and I think he’s probably a man of his word.”

Democrats were divided. Was de Blasio’s decision to support Cuomo–Hochul a selling-out of progressive principles? Or was he in fact doing the smart and responsible thing in extracting a promise from an all-but-certain-to-be-reelected governor to support major progressive initiatives?

Would a Mayor Wu or an LG Wu, faced with political reality, act any differently?

The only way to find out was for Wu to win, but perhaps there were clues to be gained along the way. Walking from the Tweed Courthouse to City Hall Park, Skelding, the *Capital New York* reporter, was asked if he’d noticed whether Wu, exposed to the gamma rays of a political campaign, had become, how shall we say, more of a —

“A creature?” said Skelding, with journalistic alertness. “Uhhh. Well, no, I don’t think so. He didn’t tie his shoes today before he met with the press corps. Not just one shoe, but two shoes. I don’t think he’s becoming a *creature*. I don’t think insiders would have him if he wanted to join them.”

SEPTEMBER 8. The day before the election, Hochul and Wu appeared back-to-back on *The Brian Lehrer Show* on WNYC radio. It was the closest thing there’d been to a debate. Lehrer ’96PH challenged Hochul on her congressional record and the Moreland Commission. On Moreland, Hochul said that as much as the media was talking about the issue, “the voters are talking to me downstate about affordable housing, passing the DREAM Act, getting a minimum-wage increase, and women’s issues.” Wu, in his segment, attacked. “Voters think there’s already overrepresentation of moneyed interests and banks in Albany,” he said, noting

Hochul's work as a bank lobbyist. "I have a completely different vision for what the lieutenant-governor position can be. I'll be an advocate for the public. I will be a critic of the governor's policies when I think they go wrong, I'll be a supporter of the governor when I think he or she is doing the right thing. All Kathy Hochul will do is be a lackey who repeats what the governor has said. We have too much concentrated power in Albany already. We don't need another lackey."

It was a gray day, threatening rain. Wu and Teachout were scheduled to appear at a final rally that evening in Union Square. It was looking like a washout. But by 6:30 p.m., the sheet-metal clouds had split their seams to the west, exposing long, horizontal strips of crisp blue and Creamsicle orange. Wu, in a dark suit and tie, appeared on the plaza, and about a hundred revelers, some wearing buttons indicating an Occupy past, cheered and made way for the candidate to ascend the three low, wide steps.

Wu thanked the crowd. "Use the people's mike!" someone shouted, but Wu declined, and Farahnik beckoned people to simply come closer. Wu recounted how, that morning, Lehrer had asked Hochul about the Moreland Commission, and how Hochul said that the voters she'd talked to didn't seem to care about that. Now Wu asked the crowd: "Do *you* care?" *Yes!* "Do *you* care?" *Yes!* "If you're embarrassed that our state politics is the mockery of the entire nation, please say to me: We can make it better." *We can make it better!*

Teachout was on her way. In the meantime, Wu shook hands, spoke to supporters, and even held and kissed a baby — the textbook move of the political animal. It turned out, though, that the baby was his.

SEPTEMBER 9. Children with cartoon-character backpacks streamed into PS 33 on Ninth Avenue in Chelsea, a block from where Wu lives with his wife, Columbia law professor Kate Judge, and their infant daughter, Sierra. A news van shared curb space with gold school buses disgorging more youngsters, and the scrum of reporters in front of the school drew curious looks from the trickle of parents and voters heading inside. "There he is!" someone said, and a cameraman from ABC 7 ran to the middle of the sidewalk and aimed his lens at the two figures walking up from the corner. Wu and Teachout strode together, smiling, stopping to shake people's hands.

The duo reached the front of the school, talked with reporters. Then Wu said, “Wanna vote? Let’s go vote.”

Teachout had already voted in Brooklyn, so Wu led the way into the school. The gym was lined with long tables of voter rolls and election clerks. The voting booths were at the back. With TV cameras on him, Wu got his ballot and took it to a booth, where he enjoyed a rare solitary moment. He filled out the form, held it up for all to see, and then fed it to the optical-scanner machine. His small entourage applauded, and so did voters in the gym who realized who it was.

Outside, Wu told reporters, “I was so proud to fill out the oval for Zephyr Teachout. And honestly, I also voted for myself.”

The next couple of hours were spent rushing to Manhattan polling places to greet voters (the weather had turned drizzly; turnout was light, as expected). Wu’s last stop of the day was in Harlem, at PS 153. Just past noon, Wu and Kathleen Farley, who was now Wu’s teaching assistant, walked to Broadway and 145th Street to catch the train.

During the ride down to 116th Street, Wu, at the end of a campaign to which he’d given everything, was still absorbing all that had happened, especially after the *Times* endorsement, when the party elite had closed ranks around Hochul (even Hillary Clinton had recorded a robocall). Neither Wu nor Farahnik had anticipated that.

Wu and Farley got off the subway at 116th. The polls would be open for another eight hours, but Wu had to switch gears now. He had a copyright class to teach. He strolled across College Walk, to the best job in the world.

The victory party, as it was called, was held at a party space in Hell’s Kitchen. After the long, misty day, the atmosphere inside was joltingly electric, festive, bustling: a youthful crowd, a cluster of hot TV cameras, reporters and bloggers on the couches typing on their laptops, a beaded chandelier above, Blondie’s “Call Me” pulsing, bordello-red curtains, an overpriced bar, a blue sign on the stage that said MONEY OUT, PEOPLE IN. Though the odds of victory were remote, a certain wire of suspense ran through the room. Anything could happen.

Mike Boland, in jeans and untucked shirt, gave updates from the stage that alternately tantalized the crowd (“Zephyr and Tim have won both counties”) and deflated it (“Governor Cuomo is ahead 58–38”). With half the precincts reporting, and Cuomo and Hochul both ahead by double digits, the crowd passed through an imperceptible threshold, into acceptance. Minutes later, as Wu approached the microphones, the room erupted into a joyful chant. *Wu! Wu! Wu! Wu!*

This was not exactly a concession speech. As the cameras flashed, Wu did not resemble the archetypal losing candidate with the stricken smile, winking gamely at supporters in an ill-lit ballroom. Rather, he looked moved, grateful, pleased. He and Teachout had done, if not the impossible, then the possible — and at this moment the distinctions were meaningless. Calling the campaign “one of the most incredible, enriching, startling, amazing experiences of my life,” Wu swallowed whatever regret he may have felt at the outcome and considered the numbers. “I think we gave a pretty damned good show,” Wu told the crowd. “We took at least 40 percent of the vote, twenty counties — and I have one paid employee.” Wu never mentioned Cuomo or Hochul. Instead, he raised his rhetoric to a national register. “Inequality has become a moral issue,” he said. “The wealth disparity between the haves and have-nots has become repulsive to anyone who believes we share a common humanity. We have lost touch with the fundamental American value of equality, and that must change.” He proclaimed himself a Democrat rooted in Progressive Era antitrust, anti-corruption values. “Let me remind you: corporations are not human beings. An economy that works for corporations does not necessarily work for us. We’re in *competition* with corporations. We need to reaffirm that this is a party — this is a country — that cares about humans more than it cares about legal fictions.”

It became clear, as Wu spoke, that he and Teachout had an agenda beyond the election. “You *know* this doesn’t end here,” Wu said, though he hardly had to. As many in attendance knew, another battle was coming, and it was right over the next hill.

WU 2.0. “This is the fight of our times.”

Six days after the election, Tim Wu stood in a gray suit under a crystal-blue sky amid a group of more than a hundred demonstrators on Broadway next to City Hall. People held signs that said SAVE THE INTERNET.

It was September 15, the deadline for comments on the FCC's Internet rules, whose language permitted "commercially reasonable" deals for carriers. The public had submitted 3.7 million comments. "The problem," Wu had written on the *New Yorker's* website in May, "is that the words 'commercially reasonable,' on their face, imply slow-lane and fast-lane deals, whereby carriers like AT&T and Comcast would favor the strong and hurt the weak, while enriching themselves in the process."

Four months and one political campaign later, Wu, the father of net neutrality, was addressing the movement that he had started. Only he wasn't exactly the same. His brief rewiring on the political circuit might have been part of it (followed by a post-election re-rewiring), but some other switch had been thrown: two months on the trail had brought him out of his writer's solitude, out of cyberspace, and into the living street.

"Why has net neutrality struck a nerve?" Wu said to the throng, oratorically. "I'm telling you, it is a debate over what kind of country we want to live in, and a debate over the meaning of America."

Among those applauding Wu was Zephyr Teachout. This was the pair's first public appearance together since the election — a mini-reunion of sorts, almost nostalgia-tinged, and a substantiation of Wu's election-night remark that "this doesn't end here."



Election-night party, Hell' Kitchen. Photo: Timothy Fadek / Redux

"Net neutrality stands for a simple principle: that in certain parts of life, we need equality," Wu said. "The sense that when you go on the Internet and speak your piece, that you have the chance to be heard as much as the big guys do — that's

the kind of country we want to live in. Net neutrality stands for the idea that there are some parts of the public sector that are just too basic to be divided between the haves and the have-nots, that are just too essential to let some people go faster and others go slower."

Wu reminded people, too, that in October, the public-service commission would announce its verdict on the Comcast merger.

"Billions of dollars in higher prices is not in the public interest," Wu said, returning to his pet campaign topic. "There is no way that Americans need to be paying more for cable and Internet. The public interest is open Internet and lower prices. What's not in the public interest is higher prices and a consolidated cable industry. Anyone who looks at the issue for five minutes, who hasn't taken money from Comcast, sees it."

Back in the fight, it seemed that Wu's loss in the primary might be net neutrality's gain. As LG, he would have had a public platform from which to shine light on the subject. But as a private citizen, he was completely unfettered.

The next day, after teaching his copyright class, Wu sat behind his desk in his book-filled office at Columbia, paring his fingernails with a three-and-a-half-inch hunting knife that he'd gotten in Argentina. Behind him, on the floor, a hulking, rock-fleshed, three-foot-tall replica of the Marvel Comics superhero The Thing stood ready to clobber somebody.

Wu couldn't say whether he'd try politics again, but he knew his experience had been unusually positive — he'd had a great staff, for starters — and was unlikely to be repeated. He'd enjoyed himself immensely, had stayed true to himself, and hadn't been bloodied. Best of all, he still had a major stage from which to shine his light.

"Columbia is a great platform for addressing the issues that I care about and intend to keep pushing on — antitrust, communications, infrastructure," he said. "Everyone's talked about taxes, but how about the access to daily necessities, and the power of private monopolies over cable?"

As Wu angled the lustrous blade against his cuticle, he was asked about a comment he once made, that it was regular people who should go into politics — not

creatures.

Wu thought for a moment. “I did notice something on the trail. One morning, I said, ‘You know, every day on this campaign, my skin gets thicker.’ Which I guess is a good thing, but it’s also how you become a reptile.”

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