

What Makes A Good Politician?

Lee Hamilton Commentary

Members of Congress play a central role in our lives. They shape our health-care system, make crucial decisions about the U.S. economy, and represent the hopes and interests of every American in Washington. Given this fact, I'm always surprised that relatively little attention is focused on examining closely whether someone serving in or running for Congress has the personal attributes it takes to be an effective member of the institution. If someone's behavior is shady or unsavory, that will make the news. But the qualities and skills that set good politicians apart should draw more notice.

Chief among those qualities is honesty. The public may believe that politics is a dirty business, but effective members of Congress must be trustworthy. They understand that to work together over the course of years, they must level with their colleagues. The same is true in their dealings with constituents, who are on the lookout for hyperbole and misleading statements.

The best politicians also sustain an unusually high energy level and an ability to focus on the task at hand. They tend to have few hobbies, for the simple reason that public office is all-consuming; there's always another item on the to-do list.

Most good politicians are also ambitious, on fire with the wish to make something of themselves, and though many see this in personal terms, it usually means policy ambitions as well. They want to have a hand in contributing to the success of the nation and in finding ways of making life better for the people they represent.

While most politicians — good and indifferent — are adept at identifying and seizing on issues that will work to their own or their party's benefit, the better ones possess an additional skill: they know how to use the system to achieve results. They understand where in the federal bureaucracy to get help for a constituent, and they think creatively about how to use the congressional process and their colleagues' interests to advance a policy goal.

Perhaps just as important, they also understand the limits of their power — both what a legislator can realistically accomplish, and the fact that legislators might react to events but rarely can control them.

This ability to keep oneself in perspective is crucial to a politician. After years in office, it is supremely tempting to think of a legislative seat as an entitlement, as something held by right. It's not. Good politicians not only understand that they serve in a representative democracy, they embrace the challenges and opportunities this offers them.

The occasional exception notwithstanding — Richard Nixon comes to mind — they are good communicators who genuinely like all kinds of people and are comfortable talking to perfect strangers in all kinds of environments. They are accessible to the grand and the humble alike. They are sensitive to the mood in a room, know how to read an audience, and are quick to respond. They are generally open to other points of view, and know that while they may differ with someone on one issue, they'll likely be working with him or her on another in the future.

And perhaps most important, they understand that politics involves give and take, and the ability to find common ground. A good politician listens very carefully to those on the other side, not only to learn their arguments, but especially to learn how far he or she can move them and how far he or she has to be moved in order to reach consensus.

This is why politics puts a premium on resourcefulness and intelligence, and tends, over time, to discourage ideological blinkers — if you approach a problem by saying that all the good is in your side and all the bad lies with the opposition, then you'll never accomplish anything. Good politicians persist in trying to forge agreement on policy or political goals, and they can take defeat in stride; they know that setbacks and criticism go with the territory, and are quick to learn from them and move forward.

Finally, they never forget where they're from and fight hard not to succumb to Potomac Fever. They understand their districts and states, remain loyal to their constituents, and have an abiding faith in the decency, intelligence and patriotism of the voters. Without that, it's almost impossible to be a true representative, able to express in the halls of the powerful the hopes, dreams, and interests of ordinary Americans. That's what they got sent to Washington to do, and the very best never forget it.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years. Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years. As a public service, Hamilton writes regularly about Congress and what individuals can do to make our representative democracy work better. His columns, offered to you free, are part of the educational mission of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, where he is director.
(www.centeroncongress.org)