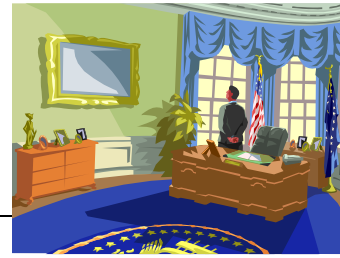


A Political Career



Everett McKinley Dirksen
Cowles Comprehensive Encyclopaedia

Years ago, a polling agency which samples public opinion at the national level asked the fathers and mothers of the nation whether they would like to see a son or daughter pursue a political career. The answer was a resounding, unanimous "no" and the reason assigned was that it was a corrupt, dishonest, immoral field of endeavour which could only defile one who entered that domain.

This is a strange but understandable attitude. It is understandable because mass media inevitably brings the evils of politics and the peccadilloes of politicians inevitably reach the front page and make racy reading. On the other hand, it is a strange attitude because politics as the profession dealing with the management of public affairs at every level, whether local, state, or national, conditions the very climate in which virtually all human activity is conducted.

Today, the farmer, the labourer, the businessman, the industrialist, and the educator are directly affected by governmental action. One can name no field of activity which Directly or indirectly is not touched by public law or regulation and hence the art of government becomes increasingly important. Moreover, every year sees a deeper and deeper intrusion of government into the affairs of people and this intrusion is spelled out in terms of those who direct and manage the affairs of government.

Is the political field a worthwhile endeavour? The honest answer is that it is frustrating, it is disappointing, it is disillusioning but along with all this, it is exciting and brings a rich satisfaction in terms of service rendered to community, state, and nation. And to the people who are served.

What then are the opportunities in political life? They are many and varied. But to provide a more specific answer, it is necessary to analyze the political field.

The first determination to be made is whether the individual interest lies in the field of local, state, or national politics. To this should be added the field of party politics, aside from the field of public office. Whatever the interest - whether the goal be the governorship, other state office, the mayoralty of a city, a councilman or alderman, the Congress, or the Presidency - the objective must determine the course to pursue and the specialization of effort and preparation to be undertaken.

Still another choice or determination must be made and that is whether one has in mind the field of elective of administrative office.

Administrative office is also a part of the political domain. At the national level it would include the Cabinet, the heads of the many Federal agencies and bureaus and in fact that huge group

from a humble file clerk to a top administrator in government. In the State field, it would include the same general group from department heads on down, and likewise in the local field.

To give some hint of how extensive the whole political domain really is, a recent estimate indicates that there are in round figures 2,500,000 persons on the Federal civilian payroll and 7,000,000 on state and local rolls. To be sure, these estimates include both blue collar and white collar workers of all types and classifications, but they are still impressive in indicating how governmental activity at all levels has grown, and it is fair to say that on the basis of historical perspective, that it will continue to grow..

To anyone interested in the administrative field, one can give only a general hint of the preparation to be made. Today there are thousands of lawyers in government. A basic legal education will suffice, leaving specialization to come later. The Department of Agriculture has a veritable army of employees and obviously the top career positions are occupied by those who have become specialists in some field of agriculture. This might well be said of the growing interest in Space and space technology. In any event the goal is important for it will automatically dictate the type of preparation which must be made.

But turning now to the elective field, which unlike the administrative or bureaucratic field is a more precarious career, in the sense that one can make it a lifetime work only by the sufferance of the voters, the approach is quite different.

There is however no absolute rule. It has been so often observed that a young man or woman preparing for a venture into politics should begin at the very bottom of the political structure and advance from there. One can point to many Governors, Senators, Congressmen, Mayors and others, who had very little contact if any with party organization but who were elected because they were well known and had succeeded in some other line of endeavour whether it was law, business, industry or some other field.

Generally speaking, however, it is a good rule to take an elementary approach and learn what makes politics tick. To be nominated for and elected to public office, whether local, state, or national, is essentially a party matter. The major political parties - Republican and Democrat - could function only through a vertical organization which runs from the precinct committeeman and county chairman, through the State organization and on up to the National Committee and the National Chairman. Through party service, one can place himself in line for a party call to fill a place on the ballot and, hence, the precinct - the very keystone of the party structure - is the ideal place to begin.

No better experience can be had than to volunteer for work in the precinct and at the party headquarters in a campaign. Here, as at no other level, one gets the feel of voter reactions, the nature of the appeal to be made by the candidates, the quality of party literature, candidate personalities, how votes might be influenced, the importance of personality in securing the confidence of the voter, and a score of other elements which enter into a campaign. This basic knowledge obviously leads to advancement in the party councils, and readies the individual for the day when he would like to see his own name on the ballot.

What basic academic or professional preparation does one make for all this? All basic knowledge is useful whether it be the study of the classics, or history, or economics or science. But several specific items merit emphasis. The first is logical thought in presenting a case, whether for the party or for oneself. The second is a capacity to fluently present the case in terms that the public will readily understand. The third is that type of poise which begets confidence. The fourth is the development of a manner which wins friends since this whole political art is an intensely human business. The fifth is a facility for using the means of communication such as newspapers, radio, and television because the individual must rely heavily on these to reach the vast electorate whom he can never contact or see because of the limitations of time, energy and numbers. How then shall a young man or a young woman start a political career? Perhaps when all is said and done, there is only one worthwhile and very succinct piece of advice. Make a start.