Five Lessons from the Mayor's Desk

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No one has ever claimed that the Town of Chevy Chase, Maryland is typical. Even the streetcar that made it an exemplar of the streetcar suburbs is long gone. In Maryland, one of the very wealthiest and well-educated states in the country, Chevy Chase still stands out. Among many well-known locals, former constituents included Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and political prognosticator Charlie Cook. The town remains heavily white with a growing Asian American population; however, the local schools operated by the county are highly integrated. Like many similar inner suburbs, it is environmentally conscious, very liberal on social issues—it voted overwhelmingly for marriage equality during the 2012 referendum—and votes heavily Democratic. I was the town's first openly gay councilmember and, later, mayor. Quite honestly, this fact did not seem to gain or to lose me many votes. If someone had attacked me on this basis, I would have won in a landslide. In this short essay, I present five lessons I learned by entering the "political thicket."[1]

CREDIT SHARING IS CRITICAL

In *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, David Mayhew (1974) described how politicians claim credit for governmental actions from the approval of infrastructure projects to the workings of the bureaucracy. Overlooked by political scientists is the notion of credit sharing. Political credit is not a finite good. At the risk of sounding hopelessly schmaltzy, credit, much like love, does not reduce in value when shared. Politicians do not receive less credit for sharing credit, if only because thanking someone is a deft way of claiming credit; thanking someone involves the speaker in the activity without quite so directly claiming credit.

Indeed, sharing credit often increases the benefit to the person doing the sharing. When a politician thanks another politician, individual, or group for their invaluable help, it redounds to the speaker's benefit. The people thanked appreciate the acknowledgement. Politicians who express gratitude toward others appear bigger and more gracious in the eyes of constituents. Beyond being nice, credit sharing is a costless way for politicians to build political capital not just with constituents but also other politicians and the bureaucracy.

Credit sharing makes politicians more effective because individual politicians rarely achieve much without assistance. Town staff, often the object of complaints, are more willing to work with officials who credit them when things go well rather than throw them under the bus when problems occur. Other politicians and political activists work more easily with people who do not hog the credit but happily share it. Politicians often receive thanks, but you will notice the savvy ones quickly acknowledge others by name and may even discount their own role. Modesty is far more attractive than preening.

Clueless politicians realize none of this. One local repeat candidate, who even has experience working for elected officials, loves to claim credit and state that major changes happened due to their actions. This person never thanks anyone, routinely overstates their impact, and feels it critical to make their own importance clear. When working on an issue, this political activist must be in charge, or at least seen as a key person, and does not like to form political coalitions out of a feeling that it dilutes credit. Despite being unusually well-funded and extremely keen to win public office, this candidate has run repeatedly for public office without success. This distaste for credit sharing makes it extremely hard to gain the validation from key people that can be critical to winning needed voter support.

Politics is like dating. "But enough about me. What do you think about me?" is a losing pickup line in both efforts. Going out with someone who endlessly toots their own horn but never praises anyone else or listens to you is unappealing. It marks both dates and politicians insecure and immature.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: MENTAL ILLNESS

Politics is attractive to people with mental illness because it is an activity, unlike many others, from which no one can be excluded. My experience suggested that many people, regardless of their psychological state, participate in politics for social reasons. The few limits on who can run for office and even fewer on who can engage their government seemed to render politics a good activity for otherwise isolated individuals with psychiatric disabilities who understandably want social interaction.

Constituents

During my time in office, constituents who appeared to have some form of psychiatric disability occupied a disproportionate share of government time and resources. Like many other citizens, they tended to be very intelligent and educated. They also possessed a lot of free time, which left them free to complain and to harass government in a variety of forums.

One constituent who was very upset about the neighbors wrote me long e-mails almost daily while I was mayor restating the same complaints. Finding new ways to reargue old issues or thinking of new wrinkles that hadn't previously been tried seemed a nearly full-time occupation for this person as the problem became an obsession. Government must treat each person the same, so the Town Staff and I spent a lot of time responding.

I imagine it will surprise few that this person was an avid participant during public comments before each Town Council meeting and during public hearings, often testifying on the spur of the moment. Like several other constituents with

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mental illness, this person is one of the most frequent participants on the local listserv. Beyond pressuring local government, this active constituent also filed repeated lawsuits against neighbors and the Town, appealing as a high as possible after losing each one. After many years, the courts have enjoined further lawsuits on this topic. These actions scored virtually no success but they did garner attention and took up much time and money in the process.

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Public office also attracts people who appear to fit the clinical description of narcissists. Unlike rabid complainers, these people sometimes make good candidates. The same characteristics that define clinical narcissism aid electioneering. Narcissists are manipulative and know how to be charming when it suits their purposes. In my experience, their compulsive need to be right drives narcissists to work hard during a campaign. However, it also undermined them, particularly once elected, as it makes them easier to manipulate and they behave very badly when they lose. One former local official who fit this profile had a penchant for claiming to be an expert on every topic, at least until storming out of the meeting. At the same time, oleaginous charm that seemed obvious but often worked well emerged when advantageous.

While political psychology is a vibrant field, the role of mental illness in politics gets little attention in political science, as in many other fields, likely due to the stigma and the discomfort attached to the issue.

THE UNOBSERVABLE: AN UNDERESTIMATED CHALLENGE TO POLITICAL SCIENCE

Action is usually far easier to observe than inaction. This problem has often plagued scholarly efforts to understand the judiciary, as a court decision can result in lots of new cases being filed or not filed. The same issue arises in local legislative politics. The first time I sought election, the central issue dividing the electorate in these nonpartisan contests was mansionization. My faction favored building ordinances that placed stricter limits on the height and the size of homes, while the opposing faction wanted to repeal them. Along with these rules, the town had passed a water ordinance designed to prevent new buildings from dumping water on neighboring properties and a tree ordinance to protect the town's beautiful tree canopy. This was a hotly contested election, featuring three incumbents and three challengers, that resulted in a much higher turnout than usual for town council elections—around 50%.

When I won election, finishing around ten votes behind my incumbent ticket mate, it gave our faction a majority on the town council. As a result, we never debated these ordinances. The staunch opponent of the building ordinances who also won election never even bothered to introduce a proposal to prune them back, let alone repeal them. Any legislation to modify the building code was introduced by its supporters with the goal of making it less onerous to comply, thus undermining opposition. If scholars tried to examine roll-call voting in the town, they would likely miss the continuing divide around these questions because they were only discussed around the margins.

Even campaign materials sometimes required tea leaves to interpret. After my first election, building ordinance opponents stopped mentioning the previously hotly-debated topic directly in their literature in favor of new issues that they hoped would work better in gaining them additional seats on the council. We also rarely raised the issue to avoid alienating potential new supporters who either were uninterested or disagreed with us on this issue but liked our actions on typical local issues, such as facilitating the rebuilding of a playground and trying to convince the county government to repair ancient storm drains.

In short, political scientists need to more seriously consider how to address the problem identified by Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) influential article on the "Two Faces of Power." The problem is even worse than they describe. Their famous example of the untenured professor who wisely chooses not to speak at a faculty meeting stems from a clear, albeit unseen, exertion of power. Desire for political advantage can produce similar outcomes. No one on the council faced any real consequences from speaking in opposition to the building code. But the difficulty of observing decisions that result in silence or inaction remains essentially the same. Just because a legislature spends a lot of time discussing B instead of A does not necessarily mean that A is not a major issue or central source of cleavage.

POLITICS IS A TEAM ACTIVITY

Beginning with Anthony Downs (1957), political science has highlighted the influence of the median voter at elections and in legislatures. Median voter theory juxtaposes uneasily with literature on parties and partisanship, which emphasize their role in shaping the behavior of both voters and legislators. My own experience suggests that median voter theory may be overrated even in the absence of formal parties.

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In legislative bodies organized on factional lines, or at least a central cleavage, the easiest way to secure majority support for the passage of legislation is to gain support from people on your side of the divide. People from the opposing faction may vote with you as well if the issue is non-controversial and they happen to agree with you. On the other hand, they are also not eager to see their political opponents gain credit, and will likely prospect to see if there is political advantage to be gained either through opposition or by putting forward an alternative proposal.

Legislators from your faction are naturally more inclined to listen to your appeals, as they wish for your success if only to keep or to win control. At the same time, gaining this support requires the maintenance of reciprocal relationships characteristic of teams rather than searching for the median. This does not mean that everyone on your side of the divide always sings from the same hymnal. Instead, it requires consultation in advance so that no one is caught unaware, and that you remain broadly together on the central question—mansionization and the building code in the case of my town's politics.

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My predecessor on the council illustrated well the perils of focus on the median voter as opposed to the team. This smart, well-meaning councilmember won election with the strong support of my faction. Over the course of his two-year term, however, he gradually became less and less reliable in his support for limits on mansionization, as he moved steadily closer to the center of town opinion. Politically, this failed miserably. My faction regarded his action as a betrayal and abandoned him to support me in the next election. He became a man with no political home or base. Though his erstwhile opponents cultivated him, they did not endorse him in the election and he came in last. Another moderate councilmember who had served 12 terms also won fewer votes than members of either slate.

Both may have wrongly estimated the location of the median voter—it is easy to do when one regularly receives vocal communications from your neighbors, usually in opposition to the latest proposal, on the street and in your inbox. On the other hand, the election outcomes suggest that their positions were not badly aligned with the median voter even if my faction's support was underestimated. The problem they faced is that the center did not hold in the face of united teams with less nuanced positions. Just like these two moderates, candidates who take positions near the median voter can find large numbers of supporters sheared away by candidates either to their right or to their left. As in presidential primaries and caucuses, the more passionate voters are likely not just to participate but also to campaign. Additionally, candidates seen as uncommitted can end up being viewed as untrustworthy rather than thoughtful or technocratic. Instead of becoming more secure, moderates may find themselves isolated and playing monkey-in-the-middle with no allies to lend them support. Taking public stands, by contrast, gains a candidate supporters.

COMMUNICATION, MISTRUST AND RESPONSIVENESS

Surveys show that trust in governmental institutions has collapsed (Pew 2015). My more qualitative experience as a local official emphatically confirmed these findings. Though far from uniform, I could not help but sense the suspicion of town council actions, even among many of my supporters who know me personally. In a reflection of how Tom Patterson (1993) characterizes media coverage of politics, voters often view government through a lens of negativity and ascribe strategic motives to seemingly innocuous decisions. Political scientists may unconsciously ape this approach. "Never assume a good motive when a bad motive will do" is not far from a social science rule.

Social media strongly reinforces mistrust. When constituents are unhappy about a decision or feel that government has failed to address some problem, many rush to social media to complain and vent frustration with lack of background knowledge certainly not being a barrier to expressing a strong opinion. Sometimes, this is democracy in action—giving voice to different viewpoints and allowing elected officials to hear from people directly. Social media alerts people to issues more quickly and forces much speedier governmental responsiveness. E-mail also made it much easier to respond to constituent inquiries on an individual basis or to ask town staff for assistance in quickly resolving problems. At the same time, the ability of social media to easily spread misinformation and outrage made it much easier to create a tempest in a teapot. While not nearly as bad as the comment sections under political articles, the lack of in-person interaction facilitated the expression of greater hostility and the more general decline in political norms that affects local as well as national politics. I spent a lot of time crafting e-mails very carefully to avoid having them be misinterpreted in a negative way because, unlike on the telephone, there is no tone or modulation giving words more nuanced meaning or context.

This jaundiced view of government inevitably makes calls for more transparency resonate. Many of my constituents, for example, wanted the town to provide information about crime in real time (i.e., literally instantaneously). My town created a set of citizen committees on different topics that each had a member of the town council as its liaison in order

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to facilitate participation and input. From my perspective, they were often very helpful and provided me with new policy ideas that I could then either navigate through the political process or help modify to achieve the committee goal while being responsive to citizen concerns and ideas. Though a fair amount of time was spent fending off bad or politically unfeasible ideas, the benefits were worth it. I also attempted to use electronic and social media to communicate with residents. My successors have improved on these efforts.

Satisfying citizen desire for inclusion nevertheless remains very difficult. People are overloaded with communication. Many residents quickly delete or archive messages from the town for the same reasons that I archive the extremely long daily morning message from my university. It's not that they're completely disinterested; they simply don't have the time and must conduct triage on their e-mail inboxes. Paradoxically, people still feel left uninformed precisely because they receive and have access to more information than at any time in history. Despite the huge changes in communication, people consequently still tend to learn about government actions once they've been taken. The decline of local news coverage has accentuated this tendency.

Entering politics was like discovering that high-definition color television existed after a lifetime of adjusting rabbit ears on my old black and white. It is one thing to study campaigns; it is another to ask someone to support you. Beyond enriching my teaching, running and serving in political office forced me to stretch and to develop new skills. The experience gave me a new perspective on where political science gets it right and where work remains to be done. ■

NOTE

1. *Colegrove v. Green*, 328 U.S. 529.

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