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## Chapter **1**

# Who Runs for Public Office

**A**n image appears in your head. It's the politician: nice teeth, fabulous hair, smells great, impeccably dressed, infectiously charismatic, popular, smart. Is this you?

No! It's Hollywood. The perfect politician doesn't exist. It's a myth you mustn't let dissuade you from taking a stab at joining the local school board or town council. As you can see from watching these government boards in action, any fool can get elected. Why not take a shot yourself and raise the bar?

## To Be a Politician

Have you ever addressed an issue by saying, "If I were king of the universe . . ."? Everyone has an opinion about how things should get done. The position of King of the Universe would be ideal to solve people problems. This position, thankfully, isn't available in our republic.

If your desire is to see things run better, the arena in which you fight is politics.

The word *politics* comes from the Greek πολιτικά (*politika*), which means “affairs of the city.” Politics is often described as “the art of the possible.” This phrase means that you can do just about anything, given a rush of money from a spigot that can only open wider.

Before you dive into doing what’s right or making things better, ask yourself whether you truly want to become a politician. Is it the best way to reach your goal?

- » Politics is not a combination of the words *poly*, meaning “many,” and *ticks*, meaning “blood-sucking insects.”
- » The “art of the possible” means that politics isn’t truly about doing what’s right or what’s best, but rather about just doing something.
- » The Romans used the term *res publica* for politics. It means “the public thing.” It’s from this root that we get the word *republic*.
- » Politics is about solving public problems. When no public problems exist, politics is about creating public problems for which no solution exists.



DAN  
SAYS

## Avoiding public office altogether

It’s entirely possible to change the world — or even the policies of the local water district — without being elected. Public pressure is often missing at the local level: Hearings are held and no one shows up, the local press fails to cover the meetings, and officials put little effort into soliciting public input. By your presence alone at a meeting, you effect change. This activism requires no long-term commitment and low public exposure, for the most part.

On the other side of the table, being a politician may seem alluring, but it’s also stressful. The job itself is easy enough that any nincompoop who wins an election can hold a guaranteed job for several years. Lack of performance is rarely grounds for dismissal.

No, the stress of being a politician comes from elsewhere. For example, you may feel pressure at work, beyond the routine drama of your regular job. Being away from family, missing out on hobbies, and having an obligation to public service for what’s essentially a thankless job can be deflating.

A politician is open to criticism and ridicule, not always justified but always encouraged. You will be teased beyond anything you ever experienced in elementary school, often by people who claim to be adults. On the other hand, if you’re a

one-issue activist who implores the city council not to demolish that last historic building in town, you may be dismissed by the power players, but that's it. The activist rarely suffers from incessant mockery.

The U.S. election system is built on competition. It's like sports for uncoordinated people: The political spectrum is defined by everyone inside as a struggle between the good guys and the bad guys or, sadly, good-versus-evil. Yes, even at the local level, political life can be nasty.

- » The First Amendment upholds your right to complain about the government. The language is to "petition the government for a redress of grievances." This right covers everything from being abused by government power to being unhappy about a \$10 fee to neuter your cat.
- » See Chapter 3 for other ways you can become involved at the local level and effect change.

## Understanding who wins elections

For all the talk of who's best-suited for office, an election is really a popularity contest: Popular people win elections. As the current slate of local and national politicians demonstrates, the public doesn't always pick the best or most qualified person for the job.

The typical ballot lacks details about the candidates. On the other hand, a proposition, bond, or levy features detailed language and specifics. For an officeholder, someone who may oversee a multimillion-dollar budget and make decisions that affect tens of thousands of people, the detail is often only a name. Some ballots may show party affiliation, which is rare for local office elections that lack a primary.

- » It's not that the public picks the worst person — it's that the public is conditioned to vote for the lesser of two evils.
- » An election is a marketing campaign. If you want to be the most popular person on the ballot, you must sell yourself. See Part 3.

## Having thick skin

Being on the ballot goes beyond a popularity contest. It's personal. If you're going to take the plunge, you must have thick skin. Do you?

Don't discount this question! It's important, especially if your enthusiasm is high and you receive a lot of positive feedback from people encouraging you to run.

Suppose you submit your prized peach pie at the county fair. One of the judges offers that the crust isn't flaky enough. Dashed by receiving only a white ribbon, you withdraw from all social events over the entire summer. If this scenario describes you, you're most likely too sensitive to withstand the slings and arrows of local politics.

Criticism isn't the only needle to pierce thin skin. Your decisions as an elected official are all yes-or-no. You can't cast a maybe vote at the local level. No matter how you vote on a controversial issue, someone is angry, and deservedly so.

Based on your decisions, which you feel are best for the organization or for the public, people you don't know will suddenly hate you. No, they'll despise you. They will project all their hatred upon you, their anger fueled by the mass media and national polarizing politics. This type of disapproval goes beyond that offered by a judge at the county fair (who is getting paid in pie): It's fair criticism. As an elected official, you deserve it.

Is your skin thick enough? You'll find out when you run. Elections are brutal. Brace yourself.



REMEMBER

- » Public officials have a lower bar for slander. In an election, your opponent may accuse you of minor or unspeakable acts that will offend you. In American politics, these accusations are considered fair game.
- » Do you recall ever making a snide comment about a politician? You sneer, "That guy is a scumbag," without knowing him personally or having any details. That's how the public is trained to think of a politician.
- » In a local election, especially a nonpartisan race, extreme criticism is seen as a desperate act. See Chapter 12 for details on how to deal with negative attacks.
- » Criticism can be fair or unfair. It's fair to criticize an elected official for a decision. It's unfair to criticize someone personally, but in our culture, such criticism seems to be routine.

## Resisting conformity

I would recommend against running for office if your desire in social settings is to blend in with the group. The weight of social pressure is huge for a politician because most crave acceptance. Human beings are social creatures who value conformity and shun those with different opinions.

As a public official, you must be artful enough to enact change in a manner accepted by people who adore the motto, “We’ve always done it this way.” Group-think is infectious among elected officials. The river must flow, and no one swims upstream.

If you’re the nail that stands up, you must be pounded down. It’s extremely uncomfortable to be that nail, especially in an established origination that rewards consensus. Often, freshly elected officials give in to conformity like puppy dogs wanting to belong. That’s when they lose focus, abandon their goals, and become part of the problem.

If you’re true to your goals when you set out to campaign, resist the urge to change if you win the election and are seated in office.



REMEMBER

- » Having a backbone doesn’t mean that you must become philosophically rigid. Always be open to different ideas and willing to change your mind when given new data. The key is to make your own decision and not just echo what the get-along-go-along elected officials have said.
- » The desire to conform is greatest for a local officeholder because your legislative body is so small.
- » If you’re successful at resisting conformity, congratulations! You’ve changed something in government. This success is measurable. One person alone can change an organization through persistence and persuasion.
- » On an elected board, a legislative body, you need more than your own vote to accomplish something. Your persistence pays off when others join you.
- » Some elected bodies are naturally boisterous and no one gets along. In that situation, avoid resisting conformity and instead strive to be the calm voice of reason.
- » Go back and review your election promises. For example, if you promised to hold firm on spending, remind yourself so that you don’t submit to peer pressure or the desire of some elected bullies for unanimity.

## The Ideal Candidate

Your mental image of the ideal candidate isn’t spot-on when it comes to winning elections. After all, compare that image with photos of your crop of local elected officials. Those pictures should be hanging in the post office, yet the lot of them

won elections and serve in office. Indeed, whether you're a good fit for public office has little to do with what you look like.

Political parties and activist groups spend a great deal of time searching for the perfect person to run for public office. When they grow desperate, they look for anyone with a pulse. And they fall prey to the curious notion that you must be good-looking to win an election. Being easy-on-the-eyes helps, but it's not everything.

Anyone can run for public office: groomed candidates, regular people wanting to make a difference, and ugly people for pure entertainment. You also find small-minded, sad people attracted to public office because they desire respect they can't otherwise earn in the real world. Don't laugh; a lot of them win.

Truthfully, the ideal candidate doesn't exist. Even your supporters will confide in you, "I don't agree with everything you stand for . . ." The only way you can get someone to truly represent you in office is to run yourself.



TIP

## "HE REMEMBERS MY NAME!"

The best politicians remember people's names. The past two governors of my state have both greeted me by saying, "Good to see you again, Dan." I'm floored. You can learn the same trick, which can really boost your appeal as a local candidate.

The key is to repeat someone's name at least three times when you first meet them. You must do it out loud, not in your head.

Your friend: This is my good friend Jerry.

You: Hello, Jerry! It's good to meet you, Jerry. (He won't find it odd that you repeated his name twice.)

Jerry: Blah-blah-blah.

You: That's great, Jerry.

And you're done. You now know Jerry's name forever. The only problem that may cloud your memory is if you're introduced to too many people at once, which makes using this trick more difficult, but not impossible.

To make a difference, strive to become the ideal candidate. This process requires that you study the job, know the voter, and run an excellent campaign. Above all, it's necessary to know yourself. These topics are covered in Part 2.

- » Don't buy into someone saying, "You'd be great on the school board." Unless they are waving a fistful of dollars to fund your campaign or are willing to drive people in a bus to the polling place, don't believe them.
- » Everyone has flaws, the ideal candidate being no exception. If you don't think you have flaws, you haven't looked hard enough.
- » Despair not if you discover that you don't have what it takes. Such news should motivate you to seek out that ideal candidate, support them, and realize the change you seek.

## The Political Type

"Oh, I'm not a politician," the politician says. No one likes to think of themselves as being a politician, just as people who sell used cars tell their friends that they sell insurance. Still, I've yet to see someone who doesn't play the political game to some degree.

Running for office makes you a politician. Winning cements it. If you dislike being a politician, stop reading this book now and read *Selling Ice Cream For Dummies*. More people will like you.

## Understanding why people run for office

The key reason that good individuals seek public office is to make a difference. They want to be part of the solution. This reason is the best, boldest, most admired reason, yet few of these people ever get elected.

The actual reasons people run for office vary. Even when your goals are pure and you desire to be selfless about the most egotistical thing anyone can do, odds are good that you run for office because

- » You have a single issue that vexes you.
- » You desire to build your résumé.
- » You seek respect and adulation.

- » You want to use the office for some pecuniary benefit.
- » You need membership in higher social circles.
- » You truly want to be King of the Universe someday.

Don't let any of these items offend you. Sonny Bono ran for mayor in Palm Springs because he was frustrated with City Hall. He won and served well, addressing matters beyond the one that motivated him to get into the race. For many others, however, this list describes the underlying reason that a run for public office is an itch to scratch.

You may not admit it publicly, but if your reason is on this list, or perhaps is more targeted but still something you wouldn't share in your campaign material, fine. Should you be elected, you may find that realizing such a goal isn't the solution to your problems.

Part 4 of this book offers recommendations for those who win an election.

## Becoming one of them

I believe that all elected officials start their terms in office with positive enthusiasm, respect for their organization, and a desire to do well. Whatever infects them afterward manifests itself in three ways. These three categories classify the different types of elected official, according to my observations:

- » **Self-promoters:** These people have a top desire to promote themselves or their businesses. They may seek inside information to expand their real estate empires or those of their friends, direct business toward themselves or their friends, or engage in other scurrilous acts. I'm not making this up! Check out the ethics-in-government laws for your state and you'll see that these aren't original ideas — nor do the ethics laws stanch the self-promoters and their specific interests.

The benefit can also be personal: A self-promoter uses political office to gain entry to clubs, get special treatment or favors, and find other ways to cut in line before the people they represent.

- » **The clueless:** This type of elected official is the most common, despite the first category getting the most attention. Making government decisions requires that you be a quick study. Your job wanders between issues of public concern to staff-pushed issues to funding to strange legal concepts you never heard of before and more. Not everyone is equipped to handle such an information overload, so the clueless ignore everything and vote with the crowd.

- » **Boy scouts:** I admire elected officials who consistently try to do what's right. They aren't always successful, but they're persistent. Trust me: You will be admired for taking a stand when you believe in something, especially when your decision offers no specific benefit to yourself. This is the type of elected official I believe the public wants, and the type you should strive to become.

Almost everyone takes office assuming that they're going to behave like a Boy Scout, admired and praised for always doing the right thing. That praise may never come. Still, keep on track and do what's right. As best you can, try to avoid becoming a self-promoter. These are the political types the public loathes and distrusts.

- » Alas, even those politicians who violate ethics laws get reelected. You can change that by running against them. See Chapter 6.
- » One reason so many local elected officials are clueless is that they suffer no immediate consequences for not doing the job. Unlike in school, no one marks you down for not reading the engineer's report on irrigation pipe sizes and flow rates. Keep your mouth shut and vote with the majority and no one will ever know.
- » Your campaign promises become a message to your future self, reminding an elected official what a constituent such as yourself really wants.



TIP

## Accept the Results

Not everyone who runs for office wins, which is something any of the dozens of living people who've run for president can vouch for. The person who comes in first with the most votes is the winner. Everyone else in the election, no matter how close, goes home without any lovely parting gifts.

What the public ends up with isn't the best person for the office, but rather the best candidate. That's the system. Therefore, if you desire to be a good elected official, you must be a good candidate. This is the first step.

The second step to winning an election is to run as nearly a flawless campaign as you can. Because political campaigns are newsworthy, you probably have a notion of how they work. As in any marketing campaign, the key to success is not to spend money and waste resources foolishly. Even experienced politicians have trouble with this step.

Finally, the last step is to accept the results. If you did poorly, consider another alternative to being elected. Chapter 3 offers options.

If you did well, consider running again. Keep your attitude sunshine-positive, and keep fighting for what you believe in. Stay active. Above all, avoid attacking the winner or degrading the system. Lots of politicians lose races and win again because they're positive and persistent.

The worst thing that can happen is that you win. Being an elected official is the goal, but it comes with some interesting restrictions. Don't forget the people who put you in office, as well as all the people you represent, and pray that you serve them well in your new role.

- » Don't despair if you lose. The only true losers are those who never try.
- » If you made a good attempt, give yourself credit for shaping the debate.
- » Ability has nothing to do with who wins an election. Voters have made some terrible choices, as the country's history can attest.
- » For partisan elections, voter affiliation has more power than a candidate's character.
- » If you lose, recognize that the timing may not be right. Consider your election effort as establishing yourself, your name, your credibility. Do better the next time and your goal will be realized.
- » See Part 4 for details on what to expect should the horrible thing happen and you win the election.