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Value-Driven Public Policy Likely Requires Value-Driven Public Servants

The question for practical politicians has always been the same: where's mine?

Those who believe that such a sentiment is only reflective of the old-time political machines and hold strongly to the notion that personal gain has somehow been replaced with an unbreakable daily search for the greater good have missed a good deal of news.

Scandal incessantly headlines the newspapers and tops the local and national evening news. The work of our local legislators is graded by the quality and size of the pork brought home from state capitals. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that our representatives in Congress are judged differently than they once were in Richard Fenno’s 1978 classic, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Fenno described an adaptation and concern for local culture, local constituencies, and service. Today, it is all those things plus acute responses to the polarized environment in Washington pitting party against party. Since passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), partisanship has been extreme, but, judging by the actions of some Democratic U.S. senators now criticizing the ACA—also called Obamacare—whose constituents can be described as marginal or swing, survival and where’s-mine politics are more the case than not. Survival is the first rule, and survival means reelection.
Over the last few decades, we have witnessed the creation of a permanent class of elected officials for whom politics is their sole profession and for whom electoral survival through credit claiming and other defense mechanisms is critically important.

Lawrence R. Jacobs, in his article “The Contested Politics of Public Value,” takes a reasonable stance about what could be if we lived in a more perfect and more service-directed environment. Sadly, scandal-scarred legislatures and gerrymandered districts are the norm and what we are all accustomed to living with.

E. E. Schattschneider wrote more than 50 years ago that an upper-class bias in the pluralist heaven certainly exists, and that is likely where the technocrats, as so desired by Walter Lippman, as specialists in policy fields reside. Are they really our best hope for democracy? Or is their job to keep their client relationships to particular interests in place? Do they, the technocrats, likely staff and others in subcommittees or in the offices of legislators at the federal and state levels, determine more, in some instances, than their elected bosses? It is not the shouts of those aggrieved they hear. It is the voices of the interests they know and with whose representatives they speak. The research supporting that observation is substantial.

What of the attempt to skew public value, as described by Jacobs in his discussion of Barry Bozeman’s work? Is public policy an instrument for the public good, or is it instead an instrument for the public good only so much as it can determine the probability of reelection? If staff were impervious to interest groups, why would they not tell members of Congress of the possibility of a more consumer-oriented single-payer health insurance system? Were this not the case, might the single-payer option have been the outcome of a rational, benefiting-all discussion of the future of health care, as opposed to a system that is controlled by a single interest group—the insurance industry—whose profits will in all likelihood increase dramatically as a result? Where is the public good sustained by public policy?

What can we draw from Jacobs’s work with Benjamin Page is a growing anger derived from the inability of those elected to show the conscience required to do the public good. The advent of information-driven campaigns is not new. In fact, the history of modern political consulting can be traced to the successful campaign to destroy President Harry S. Truman’s health care reforms undertaken by a California-based husband-and-wife team of political professionals named Whitaker and Baxter. They got their fees, and it took another quarter century until Medicare was enacted. And a bit less than 50 years later, we now have Obamacare.

How do we create a value-based public policy that denies the impacts of interest groups and discounts legislators’ fears of unelectability? Is fear of television ads, direct mail, and social media targeted against legislative members their new moral compass? The answer is yes on all counts. To create public value, one must show public courage. If technocrats were the non-value-burdened evaluators so sought by Lippman and even Woodrow Wilson, they would fill the gap. Sadly, they, too, watch television, have mailboxes filled with direct mail, and are the recipients of social media messaging. We will have value-based public policy when we have value-driven political figures whose careers are secondary to the good of the public they allege to serve.

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