

IPA-Navigating politics-8-22-19

How to navigate government and politics

By Jim Nowlan

I am giving a talk to long-term state prison inmates, soon to be released, about how to navigate government and politics. This, on the premise they will need licenses to drive and ply some trades, and maybe even want to get involved in politics.

Background: Illinois is divided into 10,000 voting districts called precincts, each with roughly 500 voters. Political parties have long used precincts to organize and contest elections. Precinct committeemen are elected at primaries to advocate for their respective parties (called “captains” in Cook County, where they are appointed by party higher-ups).

When I was in politics half a century ago, political party organizations were important in navigating politics. Citizens would go to their committeemen to find out who to contact to resolve their problems with, say, DVM or other state agencies. No longer, with rare exceptions.

Patronage jobs in government, which committeemen and captains once coveted, are mostly gone. So, why seek the post? In addition, television ads and money have basically replaced party as campaign tools. As a result, candidates for offices such as state legislator now must build their own personal organizations of volunteers and committees to raise money for campaigns.

I suggest that if a citizen wants to navigate politics, he/she get to know, maybe even volunteer with, the local state legislator (Illinois House and Senate members) and his or her small staff.

Why this office?

Local officials, such as basically volunteer city councilmen, are generally lacking in political savvy (with the exception of well-paid Chicago aldermen). Higher up the political ladder, U.S. congressmen represent three-quarters of a million citizens each, and thus are often located too far away physically and psychologically to get to know you well.

In contrast, each state House member represents a more manageable 108,000. This lawmaker has one or more offices in his district, and a legislative assistant or two.

This assistant is paid to respond to, often solve, your problems with government. These assistants are generally quite approachable—it's their job.

The assistant also cooperates with his or her several counterparts in each U.S. congressman's office. These aides are specialized to help, respectively, with problems of veterans, Social Security, Medicare, getting a military band for your parade, whatever.

The best way to address a problem with government is, ideally, to introduce yourself to the legislator's aide in the district office. And if the assistant makes an effort to help you, say Thank You, Thank You. This little gesture goes a long way.

The assistant is also sometimes, in off hours, involved in helping re-elect her boss, or would know whom to contact if you wanted to volunteer.

Thus, if you want to get personally involved in politics, the state House or Senate member would also be a good place to start. If your local lawmakers' values are not compatible with yours, find one in a nearby district who is simpatico. As I said, elected officials now build their own "organizations," to help them in re-election and maybe even in moving up the ladder to higher office. These political organizations appreciate really good volunteers. Note: I said "really good."

When I was running statewide and presidential campaigns, my staff and I would remark that for every 10 people who “volunteered” in our campaigns, we would be delighted if one proved to be of any value. After all, these well-intentioned folks are volunteering. As such, the times when a campaign needs help often prove inconvenient to a volunteer, so they don’t show. And walking precincts door-to-door or rallying for parades is not everyone’s cup of tea.

Really good volunteers always show and do most anything asked of them; they are remembered and valued.

Politics (getting *into* office) and government (serving *in* office) are obviously related, yet separate. In my day, the line of separation was blurry. Today, the line is sharp, because of increased public sensitivity to our state’s reputation for corruption.

For example, in the 1960s, ex-governor William Stratton was acquitted by a federal jury of using campaign contributions for his wife’s jewelry, fancy clothing, and furnishings—without reporting the money as income. More recently, Chicago ex-congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. and former, very effective, governor George Ryan have been sent away for arguably lesser offenses. Times, and the attitudes of juries, change.

So, never, ever give even a passing thought to offering to trade something of monetary value to earn a favor from a government employee or elected official. Your granddad might have suggested that such is the way to do political business, and it often was in his day. Not today.

I could teach—and have—a semester-long course out of this general topic. Politics is important to democracy. I hope you will at least stick your toe into the water.

