

In Defense of Politicians

The Expectations Trap and Its
Threat to Democracy

Stephen K. Medvic



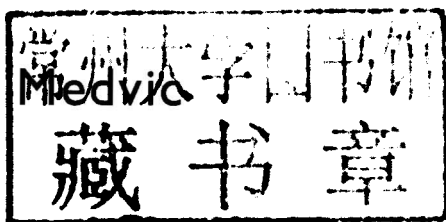
Controversies in Electoral Democracy and Representation

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In Defense of Politicians

Politicians are reviled. From jokes on late-night TV talk shows to radio show rants, and from public opinion polls to ubiquitous conventional wisdom—politicians are among the most despised professional class in modern society. Drawing on seminal work in political science, Stephen K. Medvic convincingly argues to the masses that this blanket condemnation of politicians is both unfair and unwarranted. While some individual politicians certainly deserve scorn for misjudgments, moral failings, or even criminal acts, the assumption that all of them should be cast in a similar light is unjustified. More importantly, that deeply cynical assumption is dangerous to the legitimacy of a democratic system of government. Politicians, as a class, deserve respect, not out of blind obedience to authority but because democratic deliberation requires it.

Medvic explains how cognitive biases in the way people reason often lead us to draw unjustified conclusions of politicians in general based on the malfeasance of some. Scandals involving politicians are likely to be remembered and to serve as “evidence” of the belief that “they all do it.” Most politicians, in fact, care deeply about their cities, states, and nation. But they face a trap of unrealistic and contradictory expectations from the public about how politicians should behave. Medvic, in turn, demonstrates the necessity of ambition, the utility of politics for resolving conflicts peacefully, and the value of ideology in framing political choices. In the end, citizens must learn to tolerate the inherent messiness of politics as the only viable alternative to violent conflict. In the process, we must embrace our role in the political system as well.

Stephen K. Medvic is Associate Professor of Government at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Controversies in Electoral Democracy and Representation

Matthew J. Streb, Series Editor

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In Defense of Politicians

The Expectations Trap and Its Threat to Democracy

Stephen K. Medvic

Much of the strength & efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends, on opinion, on the general opinion of the goodness of the Government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its Governors.

Benjamin Franklin, to the Constitutional Convention,
September 17, 1787

Politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards, with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement. It is of course entirely correct, and a fact confirmed by all historical experience, that what is possible would never have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible. But the person who can do this must be a leader; not only that, he must, in a very simple sense of the word, be a hero. And even those who are neither of these things must, even now, put on the armour of that steadfastness of heart which can withstand even the defeat of all hopes, for otherwise they will not even be capable of achieving what is possible today. Only someone who is certain that he will not be broken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it, and who is certain that he will be able to say "Nevertheless" in spite of everything – only someone like this has a "vocation" for politics.

Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," 1919

Preface

A television commercial convinced me to write this book. A Sprint Nextel ad, called "What If Firefighters Ran the World?" begins with a seasoned fireman banging a gavel and speaking to an assembly of his colleagues through a cell phone using the company's Direct Connect service.¹ "How 'bout the budget?" he asks. "Balance it!" the parliament of firefighters responds in unison. The assembly proceeds to unanimously decide that the tax code should be kept to "one page or less" and that we should have "better roads." After flipping through a stack of pages, presumably an environmental bill, the speaker of this House of Firefighters says, dismissively, "A lot of paper to tell us we need clean water. Need clean water, guys?" To which the firefighters respond, "Aye!" Looking at his colleagues, the leader of the assembly concludes, "This is the easiest job I've ever had."

Though I can appreciate the humor in the ad, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that I hate it. But I imagine millions of television viewers nodding their heads and knowingly smiling as they watch the ad. Indeed, it plays on a sentiment that runs deep in American political culture—namely, that politicians are pathetic, if not despicable, creatures who waste time and money, talk too much and deliver too little, bicker over trivial matters for partisan reasons, and fail to solve problems that should be easily solved.

But the problems of a nation of over 300 million people cannot be easily solved. In a free society, interests clash and politics is the site of the battle. It is the job of politicians to both represent a given set of interests and find ways to resolve conflict. That cannot be done by waving a magic wand (or using a push-to-talk cell phone).

This book is an attempt to help Americans atone for the sin of what the writer Thomas Mallon has referred to as "democratic pride." In explaining the lack of a great novel about Washington, D.C., Mallon

noted, "A serious novelist must take his characters seriously, regard them as three-dimensional creatures with inner lives and authentic moral crises; and that's just what, out of a certain democratic pride, Americans refuse to do with their politicians."² Democracy, apparently, creates a political superiority complex in the people. Something about either this form of government, or the unique history and political culture of the United States, encourages citizens to think that they are better than politicians. But to do so, as Mallon suggests, they have to treat politicians as cardboard cutouts rather than real human beings.

In his final statement to the House of Commons, on June 27, 2007, British Prime Minister Tony Blair defended politics and those who make it their profession. "Some may belittle politics," acknowledged the Prime Minister as he said his farewell, "but we who are engaged in it know that it is where people stand tall. Although I know that it has many harsh contentions, it is still the arena that sets the heart beating a little faster. If it is, on occasions, the place of low skullduggery, it is more often the place for the pursuit of noble causes."³ Imagine—politics as an arena where noble causes are not just occasionally pursued, but are pursued *more often* than is low skullduggery. I dare say most Americans (not to mention Brits) cannot imagine it.

One might reasonably ask, what else would we expect Blair to say about the field to which he devoted most of his adult life? Flattering comments about one's chosen profession may sound self-serving, but that does not make them any less accurate. Indeed, I wrote this book because I believe that what former Prime Minister Blair said in his farewell statement is as true about American politics as he says it is of politics in Britain. Politics is a noble affair and those who make it their vocation ought to be afforded more respect than they get.

Bernard Crick's *In Defense of Politics*, to which the title of the present book is an obvious homage, confirmed this belief when I first read it many years ago.⁴ It is a brilliant argument about the value of politics as a process for reconciling a plurality of competing interests without coercion. Indeed, for Crick, no other way of managing society protects freedom as well as politics. The argument is every bit as relevant today, and in some ways more relevant, than when it was first published half a century ago. It is a book that should be read by every citizen.

My (limited) experiences in practical politics have also influenced my view of politicians. While in college, I was asked to manage—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—a campaign for the Texas state legislature. In graduate school in Indiana, I managed another (unsuccessful)

campaign for the state legislature and also worked for a marvelous public servant in the Mayor's Office in West Lafayette. Those opportunities taught me that politicians of all stripes care deeply about their cities and states and our nation. The countless politicians I have met in my time as a political scientist have further validated this conclusion.

Most are like Maggie Lauterer, a candidate brilliantly profiled in a PBS documentary from the mid 1990s called "Vote For Me."⁵ Lauterer's journey from a formerly beloved local television reporter to a congressional candidate despised by about half the electorate is revealing. She began the campaign with universal goodwill and was well liked and trusted. But as she took positions on controversial issues, and as the partisan rhetoric heated up, she was transformed into a caricature; she was "just another politician" saying whatever it takes to get elected. In truth, she was the same Maggie Lauterer whom television viewers had adored when she was reporting human-interest stories.

All politicians face a similar transformation. And they face unrealistic expectations for how they are to behave on the campaign trail and in office. I consider this a trap set by the public and I'll discuss it throughout the book. Undoubtedly, some politicians are questionable characters and would be so whether or not they entered politics. But I firmly believe that most are decent, honest people who commit themselves to public life (at great personal sacrifice—far greater than most of us give them credit for) in order to improve the lives of those they represent. This belief, perhaps thought to be naive by many readers, is what motivates the argument in this book.

It may seem an odd time to defend politicians. A host of political scandals erupted, or were in full swing, while I wrote this book. Some were of a personal nature; others were the result of improper public behavior. Even the normal course of politics has often appeared scandalous in recent years. How else to describe the showdown—and near meltdown—over the nation's debt ceiling in the summer of 2011?

I would describe it, without hyperbole, as the democratic process at work. It was frustrating, no doubt, but that is a consequence of the way disparate viewpoints get expressed, and different interests protected, in a democracy. What we often take to be the product of absurd behavior on the part of politicians is more often than not the result of a very complex, and in certain ways contradictory, system of government that produces a particular kind of politics.

As for the actual scandals, they are certainly lamentable. But the politicians entangled in them are the exception, not the rule. As I will try to make clear later in this book, politicians are no worse, on the

whole, than the population at large. There may even be reason to believe that they are better in certain respects.

Ultimately, the argument of this book is that a general dislike and distrust of all politicians creates a deep cynicism in the American public. That cynicism, in turn, is a threat to democracy because it can undermine the legitimacy of our government. The antidote to this poison is a more realistic understanding of politics, more reasonable expectations for politicians, and a citizenry more active in both politics and governing. My hope for the book is that it will encourage its readers to rethink their attitudes toward politics and politicians and, in so doing, that it might begin to help rebuild trust in our government and elected officials.

I am extremely fortunate to teach at an institution—Franklin & Marshall College—with a long history of encouraging students to enter public service. I suppose we could hardly do otherwise given our namesakes (Ben and John, as we like to call them). But the faculty of the Government Department at F&M, from the founding members of the modern department—Sidney Wise, John Vanderzell, and Richard Schier—through Stanley Michalak and the current members of the department, have taken practical politics and civic engagement seriously and it shows in the countless alumni who have entered politics, government, law, and related fields. Among my colleagues, Joe Karlesky patiently provided me with a perspective that served as a valuable check on my own views as I developed them for the book. G. Terry Madonna and Berwood Yost, who run one of the best polls in the United States—the Franklin & Marshall College Poll—generously added several of my questions to their surveys. And a special word of thanks is due to Bob Friedrich and Matt Schousen. Both have obligingly listened to my argument for years and both have contributed significantly to my thinking about this and many other subjects. They are not only great colleagues; they are dear friends.

Other friends and colleagues have also been tremendously helpful to me in writing this book. John Campbell, professor of psychology at F&M, convinced me early in the project that the “fundamental attribution error” was relevant to understanding Americans’ attitudes about politicians. Dale Miller, chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Old Dominion University, was a trusted sounding board for many of the ideas in this book. His wise, and gentle, criticism is always an invaluable benefit to me and I am exceedingly grateful for his willingness to help.

At Routledge, Michael Kerns has been supportive and encouraging from the moment I proposed the idea for this book. His patience, as I

missed deadline after deadline, made life considerably less stressful and his editorial insights have made the book better than it would otherwise have been. Emma Håkonsen, the book's production editor, and Gail Welsh, its copy-editor, were efficient and effective and were a delight to work with. Thanks also to Kate Legon, who compiled the index. Matt Streb has assembled a wonderful collection of books as series editor for *Controversies in Electoral Democracy and Representation*. I am thankful for his willingness to include mine on that impressive list.

As always, my largest debt of gratitude is owed to my family for their love and support. My wife, Laura, makes it possible for me to find time in our busy schedules to write and I cannot express how much I cherish her and appreciate all she does. My kids, Colin and Abigail, and my stepsons, George and Ross, kindly tolerate all the time I spend secluded in my office. They are wonderful children and my greatest source of pride.

S.K.M.
Lancaster, PA
June 2012

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 The Problem	1
2 The Sources of Anti-Politician Sentiment	21
3 The Public Lives of Politicians: Do Politicians Pander?	39
4 The Public Lives of Politicians: Election (or Ideology, or Party) Above All Else?	55
5 The 2011 Debt Ceiling Debate: A Case Study	75
6 The Private Lives of Politicians: Ambition and Hypocrisy	89
7 The Private Lives of Politicians: Dishonesty	109
8 Rebuilding Trust in Politicians	121
<i>Notes</i>	141
<i>References</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	191

The Problem

What are we to make of the following, rather obscure, anecdote from the life of Abraham Lincoln? In 1854, a Whig Party activist loyal to Lincoln placed a declaration of the budding politician's candidacy for state legislature in the local newspaper. However, Lincoln did not want to run for the legislature because he had his eye on a U.S. Senate seat and sitting legislators could not, under Illinois law, be considered by the legislature for a Senate seat. Lincoln was extremely unhappy about this public declaration of his candidacy. One observer described him as "the saddest man I Ever Saw—the gloomiest: he walked up and down . . . almost crying."¹ But he now faced a choice. He could either bow out of the state legislative race and appear disloyal to his party (which he would need if he were to have a shot at becoming a U.S. senator) or he could run for the legislature knowing full well that he would not take office if he won. Can we guess which option "Honest Abe" chose? Perhaps surprisingly, he chose the latter course and refused to take his seat after the election. Doing so, according to Lincoln biographer Richard Carwardine, was "an action which appeared to put self before cause and did his reputation some harm amongst radical antislavery men."²

The moral of the story might be that even our greatest political heroes are human beings who were forced at various points in their careers to make difficult decisions and who sometimes behaved in less than admirable ways. Or we could conclude that behind every great statesman is a great politician. Indeed, as Chester Maxey noted of Lincoln in his 1948 essay "A Plea for the Politician":

Lincoln is all statesman now; it is almost a sacrilege to suggest the contrary. The scheming, contriving, manipulating frontier politician who outsmarted the best of them has faded into oblivion, and

we have instead an alabaster saint who never could have done what Lincoln did because he would not have played politics with Lincoln's calculating cleverness.³

I suspect, however, that what most Americans will take from such a story is that all politicians are the same, whether we build monuments to them or not. They are opportunistic and overly ambitious. And, in the end, all politicians are in it only for themselves.

This book seeks to understand why Americans dislike politicians so intensely—and argues that they're wrong to do so. Ultimately, no form of democracy can function without trust in others. In a direct democracy, the populace would have to trust their fellow citizens to be informed enough to contribute meaningfully to a collective consideration of public policy and to balance their own interests against the public interest. But in a representative democracy, citizens must trust politicians to not only represent their constituents' interests, but to do what they think is best for their districts, their states, and the nation. Unfortunately, as we'll soon see, Americans have very little trust in politicians, and a great deal of disdain for them.

This chapter establishes the problem to be addressed in the book, namely, the widespread anti-politician sentiment that exists in the United States today. I begin by exploring the ample evidence of the public's contempt for politicians. I then examine a set of contradictory expectations we hold of our politicians—or what I'll call the “expectations trap”—that will help structure the rest of the book. Finally, I introduce the argument that our disregard for politicians is not only unfair, but has the potential to damage our democracy.

The Evidence

The claim that Americans dislike politicians seems self-evident and, as such, hardly needs empirical evidence to confirm it. Nevertheless, the evidence is abundant; and it is instructive. For instance, Gallup has asked about the honesty and ethical standards of those in different occupations since 1976. In 2007, Gallup asked respondents about 22 professions. Nurses ranked first, with 83 percent of the respondents saying that their honesty and ethical standards were “very high” or “high.” State office holders and Members of Congress, however, ranked near the bottom of the list, with only 12 and 9 percent, respectively, saying that they had very high or high levels of honesty and ethical standards. Only

advertising practitioners (6 percent), car salesmen (5 percent), and lobbyists (5 percent) ranked lower.⁴

On a fairly regular basis since 1958, the American National Election Study has asked respondents whether quite a few, not very many, or hardly any of those running the government are “crooked.” In 2008, more people than ever (53.9 percent) believed that quite a few government officials were crooked and fewer than ever (6.7 percent) thought hardly any were.⁵ These numbers are similar to the results Gallup found in January 2008 when that organization asked the same question. However, in addition to the 52 percent of Gallup respondents who said quite a few of those running government are crooked, another 5 percent volunteered (that is, without being offered such a choice) that *all* of them are crooked.⁶ Figure 1.1 shows the trends over time in the NES survey. Obviously, the number of people who believe that government is being run, in large measure, by crooks has increased dramatically over the last 50 years.

John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse have studied the public’s attitudes toward American political institutions more than any other

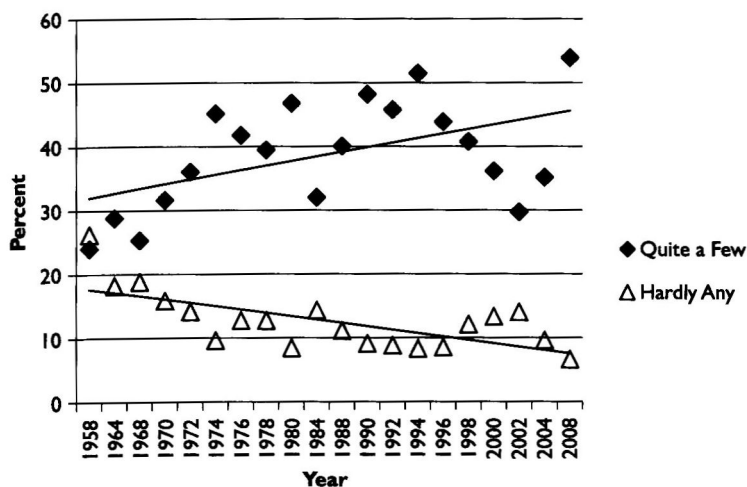


Figure 1.1 Percent of Respondents Who Think There are “Quite a Few” or “Hardly Any” Crooks Running the Government, 1958–2008.

Source: American National Election Study 1948–2004 – Cumulative and American National Election Study 2008; Survey Documentation and Analysis, University of California, Berkeley, <http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm> (accessed July 25, 2010).

political scientists. In the mid 1990s, they conducted a series of surveys and focus groups to probe people's perceptions of various aspects of the political system. "Focus-group participants," according to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, "were obviously highly dissatisfied with politicians in general and quickly drew upon their 'politician' stereotype—politicians are dishonest and self-centered."⁷ Some participants considered all politicians liars and many believed that politicians live by a double standard; while they make laws for the rest of us, they act as though they are above the law.

In a subsequent study, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that Americans are highly distrustful of politicians and find them "fractious and greedy."⁸ At the same time, the public found elected officials to be more intelligent and far more informed than ordinary Americans. In fact, when Hibbing and Theiss-Morse scratched the surface of survey results by conducting additional focus groups, they found the participants to "believe that [ordinary] people aren't very bright, they don't care, they are lazy, they are selfish, they want to be left alone, and they don't want to be informed."⁹ The disdain for politicians is so great, however, that despite the public's unflattering view of itself, people would prefer "to shift power from institutions and elected officials toward ordinary Americans."¹⁰

Of course, many people can point to particular politicians they are fond of and even admire. It has long been recognized, for example, that Americans tend to like their own member of Congress but dislike the rest of Congress. Far from challenging the claim that people hate politicians, this fact bolsters it. As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse have shown, when people think about Congress, they think of the *members* of Congress and not an abstract institution.¹¹ Since members of Congress are politicians, people consistently give "Congress" low marks. The fact that people may like their own member more than the rest of them means only that they are able to view their own representative as an actual person.¹² In general, however, people treat politicians as caricatures.

Less quantifiable than public opinion, but every bit as damning, is the evidence from popular culture. Anti-politician sentiment is ubiquitous on late-night television talk shows like *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* or *The Late Show with David Letterman*, satirical news programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, and sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*. Politicians regularly serve as fodder for comics, who exploit their foibles for audiences that seem never to tire of what is essentially the same routine night after