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Scientists and Politics

Because the political system affects their lives, scientists have been showing increased interest in politics. For the most part their activities have been narrow in scope. They have been generous with advice but not much else. Politicians like to interact with their constituents and value hearing from them. However, congressmen are targets of innumerable communications and demands. Too often, lost to sight, are their needs—which in an election year are many. Some of these are money raising, campaigning, helping to prepare position papers, and speechwriting.

A common failing of people in thinking about politicians is to group them generically rather than to consider them as individuals. Many politicians are very intelligent, self-disciplined, and public-spirited, but no two are alike; and while they share some of the drives of mankind, such as a desire for significant accomplishment, each does his thing in a different way. Astute constituents who wish to be especially valued will discover the particular ambitions and drives of their congressmen and attempt to be helpful in advancing them.

Political ambition can take various forms. One is to seek even higher office. Another is to keep being elected. A third is to be identified as the chief architect of key legislation. Being recognized as a leading figure on a given issue can be a very helpful vehicle for a politician. In recent years, we have seen how Senator Muskie (D–Maine) achieved national attention through his activities on behalf of the environment.

To be especially effective on an issue, a congressman needs to be chairman of a committee or subcommittee having jurisdiction in the matter. Indeed, a given politician's initiatives are often conditioned by committee assignments. This was true in the case of the late John Edward Fogarty, who is generally credited with having played a major role in the expansion of health research in this country in the period 1949 to 1967.

Mr. Fogarty was chairman of the relevant subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee at a time when the country was in the mood for increased expenditures for research. Among the individuals who were helpful to Fogarty and who accordingly had considerable influence with him were Mary Lasker, Paul Dudley White, and James Shannon, who was director of the National Institutes of Health during its great expansion. Mr. Fogarty was apparently largely altruistic in his championship of health research. However, at the same time, his position and renown benefited. He was easily reelected until his death and enjoyed national recognition.

In attempting to use an issue as a vehicle, all congressmen are not as successful as Mr. Fogarty. Sometimes too many politicians attempt to use the same issue. At the height of interest in the environment, more than eight committees were attempting to take jurisdiction over part of the problem. Sometimes an issue does not have sufficiently broad public appeal. Thus, some observers have said that Emilio Q. Daddario's activities on behalf of science while he was in Congress contributed little if anything to advancing his career.

One of the possible contenders for the Presidency in 1976 is Senator Henry Jackson (D–Wash.). Mr. Jackson has laid out a claim to recognition as Mr. Energy. How useful that role will be will depend on how matters unfold during the next 2 years. One objective of a politician is to reach his peak popularity and influence at the crucial moment of election.

Many congressmen are on the lookout for issues to champion that might make them especially attractive in 1976. Thoughtful scientists who come up with useful ideas have a chance of rendering a national service.—PHILIP H. ABELSON