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Principles Count

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It seems to me that one of the ways we ought to judge our elected officials is by how they treat us as electors. How do they approach us? Do they think that we are foolish? Do they pander to us? Or do they look us in the eye, tell us the truth, and sometimes say “no”?

Citizens are often treated, however, as if they are gullible—that they will believe anything they are told by an elected official. Yet as a principled representative, whether left or right, it is important to be candid with people. That means saying “no” to things that are sometimes very tempting.

Advice for Practical Politicians

I recall that when I was first elected to the State House of Representatives, former Florida Governor Lawton Chiles had some advice for practical politicians. He said, “When you go home, always tell the people *how* you voted on the issue, but never tell them *why* you voted the way you did on the issue.” How you voted is recorded for eternity: It can never change. Yet the reasons why can change over time. In other words, explanations can always be made up after the fact. That may be good practical advice, but it is not a prescription for good, honest government.

It is indeed very tempting for a politician to say one thing at home, yet do another thing when in Tallahassee or Washington, D.C. I understand those temptations. You, too, may have noticed that politicians undergo notable physical changes during election years; their backbones stiffen a bit and their hearing improves. Yet, ultimately (and seriously) a

Talking Points

- Principle-centered leadership promotes a candid relationship between elected officials and their constituents and invites people to be part of the legislative process.
- Leaders of any political persuasion can produce a great product by having a debate within the framework of six core principles.
- These core principles are: Does a bill promote less government, lower taxes, foster personal responsibility, advance individual freedom, strengthen families; and enhance domestic tranquility and national defense?

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principled review of legislation is really the only legitimate way to approach political decisions. In fact, as Bill Buckley said in a debate at the University of Pennsylvania in 1963, “The question that precedes any consideration of any piece of legislation ought still to be: ‘Will this measure augment or diminish individual freedom?’”

We recognize, of course, that it is the desire of virtually every politician to be re-elected or to move up to higher office. We recognize that politics is the art of the possible. It is not an exercise in perfection. We recognize the special difficulty and added responsibility of being a member of the majority in both Houses of Congress—and with your party in control of the White House—because we are genuinely expected to govern.

We are obligated to pass an annual budget or appropriations bills. Obviously, all 435 members of the House of Representatives would design something a little bit different, so there is no such thing as a perfect budget. They all are like the Clint Eastwood movie: part good, part bad, and part ugly.

A Principled Approach

So let’s concede right off the bat that an inflexible adherence to principles is impractical. Yet the bottom line is that how you approach life as a legislator is very important. I think, however, it is a major benefit to know what your principles are and to stand up every day and fight for them. It truly makes life a lot easier.

But principles can be inconvenient things in the day-to-day business of legislating.

Even Winston Churchill, you will remember, changed parties twice. The first time (even though he and his father had been leading members of the Conservative Party) he switched because the mercantilists dominated the Conservative Party and, as protectionists, opposed free trade. Churchill had such a principle-centered approach to government that even if it meant switching from his father’s party and his own because of a fundamental issue, he was prepared to do so. During his wilderness years (when he was simply ignored by the liberal government), he ultimately changed back. His principles came above party.

So too, Abraham Lincoln became a Republican because of his principles involving freedom. Others have paid even greater prices. Duff Cooper resigned as the First Lord of the Admiralty because of Neville Chamberlain’s insistence (following their Munich meeting) that Hitler really did want “peace in our time.” In resigning, he said, “I have ruined perhaps my political career, but that is a little map. I have retained something which is to me of greater value: I can still walk about the world with my head held erect.”

Such principled approaches are so often inconvenient for a legislator who is trying to accommodate constituents, colleagues, staff, and pressures from interest groups.

Even as Margaret Thatcher has reminded us, democracy is great under certain conditions, but not under all conditions. As early as 1968, she talked about the problem of modern politics in democracies. “All too often it is now asked, ‘What are you going to do for me?’ implying a series of promises in return for votes and creating a curious relationship between elector and elected. If the elector suspects the politician of making promises simply to get his vote, he despises him; but if the promises are not forthcoming, he may reject him.”

“I believe,” concludes Lady Thatcher, “that parties and elections are about more than rivalries of miscellaneous promises. Indeed, if they were not, democracy would scarcely be worth preserving.”

Ultimately, it is the thing that democracy produces that makes it a worthwhile form of government. Hong Kong, as The Heritage Foundation’s *Index of Economic Freedom* points out every year, is one of the economically freest nations on earth. Yet it has never been a democracy, and it is not a democracy today. For 50-some years, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule. And yet, there are lots of democracies over history that had little or no liberties, and those they had were lost and destroyed. So let’s be very careful in places like Iraq—let alone here at home—to think that democracy is the be-all and end-all.

Some fifty or one hundred years ago, democracy in the southern United States meant perhaps doing

away with due process for an African-American. That was a very democratic action, but it was not a constitutional or a liberty-oriented action. The same thing can be noted in Hitler's Germany. Adolf Hitler came to power, in part, because of severe democratic forces in Germany. Therefore, democracy is not an end, but it is a means, and hopefully it produces a proper end. We need to remember that, both in domestic and foreign policy.

Alexis de Tocqueville summed it up when he said, "I know of nothing more miserable as a democracy without liberty." The thing that guarantees us our liberty is our Constitution. I hope one of the things that you carry around with you—in addition to your principles—is a Constitution, because it is always the guide to what our Founding Fathers believed.

Edmund Burke, our first great conservative philosopher, taught us something about what we believe as conservatives in the approach to civilized government. He told us that it was more than about today or the immediate that was important. A true civilization respects its heritage. It respects the living, the dead, its predecessors and ancestors—as well as those yet to be born—as part of its society. It seems to possess a soul of its own over the eternity that binds such a serious civilization together. Just as you have to be respectful about what your predecessors taught you (under Mr. Burke's theory), you also have to be great stewards for those that would come after you.

Isn't that what conservatism and its principles are all about? Respecting the great things that our forefathers and foremothers gave us; the institutions, the culture, and so forth, while we are good stewards for those that will come even long after we are born. For Burke, there was a prescription for what it meant to be a principled politician.

Conservative Principles

I don't want to go through all of them, but if you read Russell Kirk's great work, *The Conservative Mind*, he talks about conservative beliefs and a transcendent order in the following terms:

- No single mind or no collective group of geniuses today can fully understand the design

of the complexities of inner relations and the mysteries of a higher law, meaning a God;

- Freedom and property are inextricably linked, and it can never be otherwise;
- Custom, convention, and tradition are to be preferred over some radical change that some visionary thought up yesterday; and
- We ought to be very careful about throwing out the things that bind our society together.

It is fundamental not to think that even brilliant human beings today can simply reinvent the complex human order that binds our civilization over a country and over time. Burke basically said this, and I use it as a reason why I think it is important to approach legislating from a principled basis. Without principles, all reasoning in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion. Principles become important because they are a guideline—both in the short run and the long run—for how we ought to govern ourselves.

The following six principles are those that the Republican Study Committee (92 principally conservative free-market, socially conservative members of the U.S. Congress) have adopted for evaluating legislation. These principles were taken from ones we used in the Florida House of Representatives. They serve as a prism through which we can assess any amendment or proposal, any constituent request, any colleague's request for support, and certainly any votes cast. These guiding principles allowed us to do some important things in the State of Florida that would not have been accomplished without a principled approach to governance. These principles are:

1. **Less Government.** Does the bill tend to reduce government regulations, size of government, eliminate entitlements, or unnecessary programs?
2. **Lower Taxes.** Does the bill promote individual responsibility in spending or reduce taxes or fees?
3. **Personal Responsibility.** Does the bill encourage responsible behavior by individuals

and families and encourage them to provide for their own health, safety, education, moral fortitude, or general welfare?

4. **Individual Freedom.** Does the bill increase opportunities for individuals or families to decide, without hindrance or coercion from government, how to conduct their own lives and make personal choices?
5. **Stronger Families.** Does the bill enhance the traditional American family and its power to rear children without excessive interference from the government?
6. **Domestic Tranquility, National Defense.** Does the bill enhance American security without unduly burdening civil liberty?

Dan Webster was the first Republican Speaker in Florida in 124 years. To put that in perspective, the last time Florida had a Republican House Speaker, Ulysses S. Grant was President, a guy named Custer was making his last stand, and a fellow named Alexander Graham Bell was playing around with a string and two tin cups.

Because of their longevity in office, the Democratic party became a party totally based upon power in the Florida House of Representatives. Committee chairmen determined which bills were heard and which were not. Does this sound familiar? Do you remember how passionately those of us who were freedom lovers and reformers were disturbed by what we saw in the United States House of Representatives up until 1994?

We have to be mindful that, being in the majority, we can now be the victims of the same arrogance. We have to review our approach to legislating on a daily basis. That is true for every freshman, every senior member, and every leader. It will always be true. What Dan Webster said was that we are no longer going to be a power-based legislature: We are going to be a principle-based legislature.

In Florida, Speaker Webster and I told every lobbyist that came to our offices (even those who reminded us how helpful they had been to us or to our colleagues) that we were approaching our duties based upon clear, fundamental principles on behalf of the citizens of Florida.

By advocating and advancing these six principles, I could tell committee chairmen, fellow members of the House, liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats, or even my best friend that proposals inconsistent with some or all of these stated principles would not make it through the legislative gates and hurdles. If your piece of legislation was consistent with these ideals, I was on your team and would help in any way.

Standing on principle actually invited people to be part of the process and, as Speaker Webster used to say, “flattened the pyramid of power.” It was not just one guy at the top, or two, or five dictating as an oligarchy. It was the principles that were constraining and encouraging all of us. I found the constraints and the encouragement to be a constant reinvigorating event, and it allowed us to do great things.

One thing, however, needs to be understood about principles: Principles do not change. They endure, in my view, forever. The application of those principles can change on a daily basis, for example, how you apply them to technology or how you apply the principles to new challenges in the judicial or legislative systems. It can be difficult because principled people who believe principled things may come to different conclusions about specific bills.

Edmund Burke, for example, was able to support the American Revolution and oppose the French Revolution, in large part because he saw the American Revolution as conserving the traditions, and values, and cultures of the old theorists of Western Europe. He believed it was a freedom conservation effort. What he saw in the French Revolution was a bunch of radical theorists that could use their reason to redesign human interactions. He thought that was a radical and unportable thing.

Thomas Jefferson, you will recall, supported both Revolutions. Burke was able to discern a difference. Burke, as conservative as he was and as much as he was a defender of the monarchy, condemned Governor Hastings because of his mistreatment of the people in the India colony. He was able to condemn the treatment of the Irish on the

floor of the House of Commons. Burke was hardly opposed to change. He was in favor of change that was consistent with the human cultural traditions that had held England together. He recognized, again, that you cannot let perfection be the enemy of the good.

General Robert E. Lee is another example. He understood that he was outgunned and outmanned most of the time. As a principled warrior, he knew it was necessary to pick his battles. It was not worth dying on every battlefield.

Being a principled legislator does not mean being dogmatic in every conversation and at every opportunity. It does not mean lecturing people. It does mean trying to move the ball of freedom forward on a daily basis in every way, shape, and form that you can.

The Two Great Traditions

Republicans have two great traditions that made us a majority party. One, I refer to as the “libertarian conservative position” and the other as the “traditional conservative position.” While I happen to be a civil libertarian, libertarianism taken to its extreme can be a problem.

Great political leaders—such as Margaret Thatcher, Barry M. Goldwater, or Ronald Reagan—were always able to reconcile the traditional law-and-order conservative view with the libertarian view. This debate continues today, not just domestically, but also in how we approach world affairs.

Principled people can have debates, but you will be surprised at what a great product you can produce if you have your debate within the framework of these six core principles.

In Florida, we had some pretty incredible results as a consequence of our adoption of these guiding principles. After my opening day speech outlining this framework of ideals, Joyce Cusack, a very liberal, Democrat, African-American freshman member of the Florida House, who was a nurse by profession, approached me about a proposed bill regarding alternative methods for earning recertification credits. She came with a three-page summary of her proposal and how it was

consistent with the principles. She was articulating how she thought her idea was better for families, how it represented less government, how it was a volunteer effort, etc. She had taken principles—not my principles, not Republican principles or conservative principles, but to me, American principles—and applied them to her concepts.

Hers was the very first bill that was passed on the floor of the Florida House when I was Speaker. In the process, there stood (for 30 minutes) a known liberal politician articulating the very principles we conservatives seek to advance. It was a lesson to all my colleagues that if they wanted to enlist my help, standing on principle was the way to do it.

As a consequence of this training to legislate on principle, Florida now has the most comprehensive school choice opportunities in the country—vouchers for those attending failing schools, vouchers for disabled students, a private voucher program under the Children’s Educational Opportunities Society, and charter schools. Civil service laws were reformed. Taxes were reduced every single year. Tort reforms were enacted. Florida incorporated some private alternatives into one of the largest public pension systems. All this occurred, I believe, because policy prescriptions came after the application of these fundamental principles throughout our legislative process.

Here is the point. It was not just because we wanted to be principled. A very practical approach to things was needed, too. We believed, however, that if you followed good principles, good policies would result and that would be for the long-term good of our communities and our country.

Lady Thatcher, in advocating on behalf of a free economy in 1975, said: “We want a free economy not only because it guarantees our liberties, but also because it is the best way of creating wealth and prosperity for the whole country.” It is this prosperity alone that can give us the resources for better services for the community and better services for those in need.

If you look at the *Heritage Index of Economic Freedom*, you will find that following principles at a national level—no matter what nation you are a

part of—can lead to prosperity, freedom, and a great quality of life.

In closing, I want to say that the Republican Study Committee does not have a monopoly on these principles. Members of both parties are invited to apply them. There are great opportunities for leadership and progress by using these principles to discipline our actions.

There are great press opportunities to be written about as we adhere to principle. There are opportunities for lobbyists to explain how their proposals promote free markets or individual free-

dom. For me, explaining the advancement of principle will go a lot further than reminding me how much money you contributed to my campaign or my party.

Conservatives are often accused of being a dour breed. Indeed, the fight for freedom is often a negative fight. It means saying “no” to people who are at the public trough. Yet fighting for (and on) principle allows us to be advocates and witnesses in favor of things. It allows us to be the optimists.

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