

Chapter 9

Personal Knowledge

In a democracy, citizens, that is you and I, actually hire someone to represent us in Washington. I'm not saying it's "like" hiring someone. We actually do hire someone. We pay them \$174,000 a year plus generous benefits. And we provide two or more fully staffed offices and an expense account.

Looking at the current crop of sorry specimens in Washington, we haven't been doing a very good job. And I cannot stress this too often or too strongly. It is our responsibility as citizens. We—you and I—are responsible for the mess. We've allowed it to happen. And we are the only ones who can clean it up. The way we are going to get decent hired help in Washington is to change the hiring process.

Hiring someone to provide a service is not a new experience. We hire people all the time. We hire doctors and dentists. We hire hair stylists and baby sitters. We hire vets to care for our pets and mechanics to fix our cars. You get the idea.

Let's say you need to replace a water heater. Either you call a plumber who has done good work for you before, or else you call around and see if any of your friends can recommend a good plumber. Why? Because you know your hot water heater project stands a much better chance of success if you hire a plumber based on personal, first-hand experience—yours or someone else's. You will be acting on information that should be quite reliable. Your friends have no incentive to trash a good plumber or praise a bad one.

When you look in the yellow pages or on the internet, every plumber listed is the best—competent, responsible and reasonable. Advertising is by its very nature self-serving. The only truly reliable information in an ad is the name, address and phone number.

Hiring a congressperson is no different from hiring a plumber. The only way to make an intelligent informed decision about who to hire is personal knowledge.

When a district contains 710,000 people, we are forced to make a hiring decision based on name recognition, gut feel, political party and maybe a candidate's positions on a few key issues. Or quite possibly negative advertising leads us to choose a candidate we believe to be the lesser of two evils. Advertising drives the process. And money drives advertising.

In fairness, the only way that a candidate can possibly communi-

But democracy in any sphere is a serious undertaking. It substitutes self-restraint for external restraint. It is more difficult to maintain than to achieve. It demands continuous sacrifice by the individual and more exigent obedience to the moral law than any other form of government. Success in any democratic undertaking must proceed from the individual.

Louis Brandeis
Letter to Robert W. Bruere, 1922

The greater the country, the less intimacy between rulers and ruled. The more these latter become separated by great bureaucracies and legislative establishments, the more the individual citizen feels isolated from any form of Government above the local level. All this tends to the creation of a certain anonymity of federal power. And while this anonymity does not take on in the democracy the Kafkaesque sinisterness that it did under the totalitarian systems (where it was an essential feature of the terror), it still plays its part, contributing to the impression of remoteness and impersonality on the part of government and of insignificance and helplessness on the part of the individual, and thus impairing the very meaning of citizenship. In the times when I have chanced to live in smaller countries, I have envied them the greater intimacy of their political life—the fact that a far greater number of people in government knew one another personally, and that a large percentage of common people knew at least someone in the government. Governmental personalities tended less to be meaningless names to one another and to the constituents, and more to be living, accessible figures. This, to be sure, sometimes favored intensification of animosities as well as of friendships. But better, I thought, to view with dislike someone you really knew than to fumble in the dark with figures that were no more than remote and inhuman ciphers. It is the anonymous ones that instill the nameless dread, the panic before the menacingly inhuman, the rumbling of the distant drum.

George E. Kennan
Around the Cragged Hill, 1991

cate with 710,000 people is through mass media – television, radio, direct mail and telemarketing. However, like a plumber’s ad in the yellow pages, the candidate’s ads are carefully crafted to sell. Unlike the average plumber, most candidates have a team of expensive consultants who use focus groups and polling to tailor a message to appeal to your gut feel rather than your common sense. The advertising is not designed to reveal the true character of the man or woman who is running for office. It is not designed to help you make an informed decision about who would be the best person to represent you based on character, integrity, knowledge or philosophy of government.

You and I are responsible for hiring someone to run the country. Yet, all we have to go on is a bunch of resumes in the form of advertising that have been phoned up to look good. Under the current system, we stand a better chance of getting a good plumber than we do of getting a good Congress!

It is obviously possible to take our responsibilities as citizens more seriously and to research candidates beyond the ads. Each congress person’s voting history can be found on the internet. While we might ferret out the factual inaccuracies in the advertising, it still does not give us knowledge of the person’s character.

When congressional districts are so large that the only way to communicate is by advertising, it becomes nearly impossible to make an informed decision about candidates. As an informed electorate is a fundamental prerequisite for democracy, the super size districts pose a real threat to our democratic form of government.

In fairness to the candidates, they did not create this system. You and I and the rest of the people have allowed this system to become corrupted. Candidates are constrained to work within it. Unfortunately, it has become such a lousy system it only attracts those willing to compromise themselves, and it drives away qualified candidates who cannot stand the smell. Again, the crux of the problem is that no candidate can personally communicate with 710,000 people. Therefore, to be elected, a candidate must advertise. Advertising takes money. Lots of it. As soon as a candidate takes that kind money from those who have it on offer, he or she automatically has a conflict of interests.

A candidate can have outstanding intelligence, knowledge, leadership potential and an interest in public service—potentially a great future statesman—the kind our nation desperately needs. Unless he is willing to take big bucks from big business and sign on a raft of consultants, he cannot be elected. Knocking on 275,000 doors is simply not feasible, and that’s the number of households in a district with 710,000

Were the people of the United States to delegate the powers proposed to be given, to men who were not dependent on them frequently for elections—to men whose interests either from rank, or title, would differ from that of their fellow-citizens in common, the task of delegating authority would be vastly more difficult; but as the matter now stands, the power reserved by the people render them secure, and until they themselves become corrupt, they will always have upright and able rulers.

John Hancock
Speech at the Massachusetts
Convention to Ratify the
Constitution.
February 6, 1788

As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the [House of Representatives] should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured.

James Madison
Federalist 52, 1788

Is it not natural that a man who is a candidate for the favor of the people, and who is dependent on the suffrages of his fellow-citizens for the continuance of his public honors, should take care to inform himself of their dispositions and inclinations, and should be willing to allow them their proper degree of influence upon his conduct? This dependence, and the necessity of being bound himself, and his posterity, by the laws to which he gives his assent, are the true, and they are the strong cords of sympathy between the representative and a constituent.

Alexander Hamilton
Federalist 35, 1787

people.

Let's consider what would happen to our highly desirable, independent candidate in a district with 100,000 people and 39,000 households. He asks 10 friends, family members or colleagues to help him canvas voters. He asks each of them to spend weekends calling on people and gives them a quota of 80 households per week. Within a year every household has been visited. If he can round up 20 volunteers, he can hit each household 2 times a year. While his friends are going door-to-door, our candidate is attending community social functions—church suppers, local business expos, street fairs and the like. Our candidate does have to pay for printed campaign material to leave behind at each house, but we're looking at thousands of pieces, not hundreds of thousands of pieces. The same is true if he decides to do any direct mailing.

What's important here is not how to run a campaign without big money. What's important is that it becomes possible to do so, and thus breaks the strangle hold big money has on our democracy.

I expect the American people will take to the changed dynamics of the election process like ducks to water. We will come to expect personal interaction with candidates for the House. It will be possible for us to hire our representative based on personal knowledge just as we would hire a plumber. If we don't know a candidate personally, we most likely will have friends who do. No longer will it be possible for a candidate to hide behind carefully crafted advertising—the fake resume. Of course, money and advertising will continue to be factors in an election, but big money will not longer control the process. “We, the People,” will be in the catbird seat.