

Politics: personality, money, and



Politics... The hectic schedule and heated rhetoric of the campaign. Fingernail chewing on election night. The afterglow of victory and hard work of law making or administration.

Scandal. Back-room deals. Altruism in public and hypocrisy behind closed doors.

A political life is unlike any other career choice facing a student. The rewards are great—if not in money, then in public recognition and a place in history. But politics is such a wildly uncertain career that the rewards may never come, and even if they do, eventually, the corresponding sacrifices may have been too great for compensation.

Uncertainty is a key word here. Accident and opportunity are others.

"There is a great deal of accident involved in a political career," cautioned John Comer, political science professor. "It may not be luck that explains why you remain where you're at, but it is luck to a certain extent that explains how you got there."

Most other careers—medicine, law, teaching, engineering, even non-elective government—provide relatively definite paths to be followed for entry into the field and eventual success. Not so for a career based on the ballot box.

"There is no specific career preparation for elective politics," said Robert Sittig, political science professor. But he offered some general, and often broken, rules for success.

"The voters are most receptive to a 30- to 40-year-old, successful, business or professional person who has been involved in community-affairs," he said.

Lawyers have the best luck in the political arena, he pointed out. Businessmen next best, and other professionals next. During this century, the law and business professions have accounted for not less than 94 per cent of the members of Congress during any session. Lawyers have filled about half of the Congressional seats since World War II, although the profession comprises only a tenth of one per cent of the work force.

These figures from political science studies support the view that law and politics have

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a "professional convergence." In other words, a legal practice easily can be set aside or scaled down while a lawyer fills a political post. And a few years of public life often help a legal career when the ex-politician returns to private life.

The dominance of lawyers is more marked at national levels than in state and local offices. The most frequent occupations in the Nebraska Legislature are business and agriculture, Sittig pointed out. Such part-time offices as this or city councils attract people from a wider variety of occupations because they can maintain public and private careers at the same time.

Even so, the local candidate with roots in his or her community, a successful career in business of another profession and a record of involvement in civic or religious organizations frequently has a natural edge over candidates in lower social and economic groups. The Lincoln City Council roster for example, lists an architect, minister, attorney, pharmacist and three businessmen.

Start small, Lincoln Mayor Helen Boosalis advised at a recent campus speech which focused on women in politics.

"Get into the party of your choice and work on the local level," she said. Join campus or community political groups, politically active church groups or the League of Women Voters.

"Get familiar with the area you're interested in going into," she advised. This includes attending government meetings and, perhaps taking political science courses. A way to gauge one's own eligibility for public life is to talk with an experienced politician, she said.

"You might be surprised at how well qualified you are compared with that person," she said. "Then again, you might not."

Then, it is best to start by running for a smaller political office, she said, citing her own 16 years on the city council—before that, she was active in the League of Women Voters—before running for mayor.

A woman's political career will depend on her personality, training and business experience, among other factors, the mayor said.

"It's not just circumstance that the people who wind up in the senate come quite old."

The same factors are relevant for men in public life and associations with others involved in politics, political scientists say.

"You have to know enough people who are willing to work for you to build a volunteer organization," Nebraska Democratic Party Chairman Dick White said. "It means having enough money either of your own or through donation to fund the campaign."

One of the best ways to make the necessary contacts is to do volunteer work in another campaign, he said.

"Almost everyone I know who is pursuing politics as a full-time career started by working in someone else's campaign," he said.

Campaigns need people with writing skills or the time to go out into the community as organizers or canvassers, he said.

"Then, with some luck, if their candidate wins they are very often employed by the candidate in some governmental job after the election," White pointed out.

Campaigns vary in staff size from a candidate's family and a handful of friends for low-key local offices to the masses of mostly young volunteers which had the title

"McGovern's Army" during the 1972 presidential race. Although the foot soldiers for Sen. George McGovern mostly were getting their first taste of large-scale campaigning, the leaders were experienced in previous campaigns. Campaign manager Gary Hart went on to win a U.S. Senate seat two years later.

Former North Platte Mayor Robert Phares, now a candidate for governor, outlined the problems with mounting a statewide campaign. His first step has been to put together a small group of trusted friends. From there, it has been a process of first recruiting leaders, then lower-level workers, in communities across the state. Some are people with whom he has worked as a volunteer during previous campaigns. Others are Republican Party activists.

The next step was to hire a professional campaign consultant to test Phares' of how well his candidacy might fare and to do statistical research on past voting patterns in the state. Now the organization is still in its building phase, preparing for the primary election next March.

"You really don't understand the depth of it and the complexity of it until you're in the middle of it," Phares said. "I've laughingly said that if I ever do this again I'll do it in a state like Rhode Island or Delaware."

Phares echoed a Boosalis observation. "You need to have a fairly thick skin and be able to take criticism if you get into a campaign," he said.

The effort and money needed for a campaign depends on the importance of the office and the size of the constituency, along with several other factors.

Until recently, presidential campaigns lasted about a year, from shortly before the first primary until the general election. But McGovern started his campaign two years before the Wisconsin primary. The victory boosted him to his party's nomination. Jimmy Carter was also part of a crowd of candidates starting early.

Locally, however, Boosalis has said she decided to run for mayor only a month before the primary election. Sittig pointed out that in the last Natural Resources District race, a woman who did no campaigning defeated a prominent and politically active dentist.

He notes that there are many other "low-profile" posts which offer a political novice a good chance of victory. He estimated that there are about half a million elective offices in the country. Many of them have uncontested races.

Higher offices, however, are tougher to gain. And it is here that the political rules are broken less often.

1977: A woman's place is...

The U.S. Census Bureau, for the first time, includes figures about women in business as a separate category in its listings this year.

The figures indicate that, although more women are entering business, they own only 4.6 percent of all businesses in the country. They account for 3.1 percent of all business profits.

Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine reports that the United States is eighth on the list of countries that have a countable percentage of women in their national politics. Sweden is first with 27 percent. They are followed by Finland with 22 percent, Denmark, 11 percent; The Peoples Republic of China, 10 percent; Mexico, 8 percent, Israel, 7 percent and the U.S.A. with 3.5 percent.

The odds are 92 to 2 you

"A lot of people start with crummy ideas. They get a license, a few shelves and some space. Put an ad in the paper, put up their shingle and they're in business. They don't think the thing through and get caught."

—Mike Niehaus,
loan officer,
Small Business Administration

Maybe it all started with a lemonade stand when you were in third grade. The first few pennies seemed to click with something in your chemistry.

Now, years later, you're looking in the face of a sudden burst of ambition. You want to open a business of your own, and you're not thinking about making a few pennies...

Lest you blindly risk your first-born inheritance on a business venture which goes sour, consider the following:

About 95 percent of all business in America is small business. The odds of failing in the first year of business are 98 to 2. You might say this gives you a five percent chance of dreaming up a new and exciting product or service and a two percent chance of convincing others of its need.

But, fear not idealists. There is, even against those statistics, a way to gamble skillfully with an idea until it is a business.

The growing small business venture today offers a service rather than making or selling a product. Knowing that, you might want to open up a poodle-trimming parlor.

Number one: you need capital. You can scoop up your savings, collect gifts or loans from mom and dad and seek loans from local banks.

But you must convince the bank that your business project is a realistic idea with sound possibility.

To help you here, a loan officer such as Mike Niehaus of the Small Business Administration Counseling (SBAC) in Omaha will guarantee your idea and cosign for a bank loan.

(SBAC is a federal agency supported by tax dollars which helps the small businessman. Along with backing small business risks, it makes sure big government legislation is fair to small businesses, and offers a volunteer counseling service, Service Core of Retired Executives (SCORE) which advises new businessmen on everything from bookkeeping to merchandising problems.)

The entrepreneur must convince the loan officer that he has done his homework and established capital, Niehaus said.

Doing your homework in business research means asking yourself these questions:

—Why will a poodle trimming parlor succeed?

—Is there a need for one in the area?

