

# What Makes a 'Great' Political Candidate



By Jeff Brantley

He walked across the room to an elderly woman he had never met sitting alone at the window of an assisted-living center, pulled up an arm chair and spent 15 minutes talking with her about her children, grandchildren and gardening. It wasn't contrived or fake, but a regular act of a good person and citizen leader.

That was 1994 and I was in a small town in Iowa with a first-time candidate I'd just met a few days before. I was a not-yet jaded political operative who learned an important lesson that day. People matter. Twenty years later, I recently saw on Facebook one of my favorite Indiana state legislators in a similar scene back in his hometown.

Maybe it's not fair or it's an idyllic standard, but being a good, caring, active and honorable person still does make for a good candidate for public office. Not always enough to win, but sometimes it is what makes the difference when other election factors aren't in your favor.

I can hear the professional political industry, reporters and politician-haters with a collective sigh and/or "Yeah right, this is 2014, not 1954!" Compassion, though, will never go out of style.

## Familiar attributes

It's no mystery to anyone with a cursory understanding of elections what the typical measurements of "good candidates" are: the ability to raise money (or self-fund), existing name recognition, being of the right party and ideology for a district, political experience, being articulate, attractive (you and/or your spouse and kids), lots of volunteers, lack of a criminal record or controversy, schedule flexibility, religion, etc.

Those factors all really do make a big difference in whether a candidate can be competitive. No denying it.

You can miss on one or two, however, and maybe still be in the running, but you're skating on thin ice over a shark tank.

Likewise, a candidate can be the most pleasant, honest, hard-working, Boy Scout or Girl Scout badge-deserving person you'll ever meet and still lose an election. It's usually because one or more of those standard measurements like district, issues, money or opponent's campaign were not running in their favor.

## Candidate to officeholder

A great candidate is a great person, but also well-balanced, with strong political resources and running for office at the right place at the right time. The trick for us in the political business is finding them, recognizing them and embracing them when the opportunity is at hand.

I'm concerned not just with good candidates, but good candidates who make good legislators – thoughtful, hard-working, honest, open-minded men and women who want to serve, lead and do the right thing. You can definitely find them in both parties.

In this day and age of politics with a 24-hour cable news cycle, web sites, social media and more where conflict, accusation, division and anger are king, let's not lose sight of the fact that real people do become candidates and serve in public office. We should thank those who do and encourage others to consider the opportunities that arise.

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