**What It Means To Be A Representative**

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***One of the hardest jobs of an elected representative is learning how to represent a diverse constituency.  Former Congressman Lee Hamilton explains “What It Means To Be A Representative.”***

Compared to what it looked like a couple of decades ago, Congress today is a far more representative body. It’s true that, as Congressional Quarterly recently pointed out, the House and Senate are still “populated mainly by wealthy white men with advanced degrees and backgrounds in law and business.” Yet Capitol Hill undeniably looks more like the American people than in the past.

It has more women than ever before, for instance — 90 all told. It has a mix of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans. It has its first member of Vietnamese descent, and it’s likely that its ethnic diversity will grow with each election. It has members who grew up in families with very little, and members who have never known a day of want.

Yet “representation” in Congress takes place at two levels. The first is what most people think of when they talk about how well Congress reflects the nation, the sort of tallying by category I’ve done above: gender, ethnic or racial background, and the like. The less common, but no less important, way of looking at it has to do with how well individual members actually represent their districts or states: not in terms of their looks or background, but in terms of their actions.

One of the most memorable aspects of the years I spent as a representative in Congress was the astounding cross-section of people I met in my district. I’m hard-pressed to think of another job that could have exposed me to such an array of classes, occupations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, political philosophies, and cultural preferences. Districts and states vary, of course, and some are more homogeneous than others. Yet there isn’t a constituency in the country that doesn’t call on its member of Congress to reach out to people of wildly different backgrounds and outlook.

This is not always easy. We all instinctively like or dislike people, in part based on the snap judgments we make when we first meet or even see them. Yet that is a burden the best politicians learn to get over quickly, and not just because they want to get elected.

For in the end, the job of representative isn’t just to speak for the people with whom one feels comfortable. It’s to strive to understand and represent everyone in a constituency. This is, interestingly enough, one of the more bracing aspects of the job: you invariably learn something about ways of looking at the world from people who think differently from you; you also learn that, for the most part, their motives are as sincere as your own. As it happens, this is all good training for being a legislator: listening to other points of view and searching for common ground is part and parcel of being effective in Washington.

Still, paying close attention to the diverse views of a constituency is one of the most difficult aspects of the job. The challenge, of course, is how to reconcile all those conflicting views with one another. As an elected representative, you often ask yourself what your obligation should be to people who don’t agree with you — a good many of whom will probably be working to defeat you in the next election. Clearly, you can’t violate your own core beliefs; nor can you hope to give voice to every nuance you find in your district. As a representative, though, you can work hard to understand them better; you can search for points they have in common with one another and with you; you can explain why you differ from them; and you can strive at least to acknowledge the positions you do respect, even if you don’t agree with them.

Just as important, you can make sure that you never let policy disagreements get in the way of the rest of the job — making sure lost Social Security checks get found, veterans’ benefits get paid, and other ways of running interference with the federal bureaucracy are pursued.

As a politician, you quickly learn that it’s impossible to satisfy everyone.  There will always be someone in a crowd who, when you approach, refuses to shake your hand.

Yet your job, both as a politician and as a representative, isn’t to satisfy everyone: it’s to satisfy most people. It’s to listen carefully, carry what you hear back home to Washington and express it, explain what you hear in Washington to people back home, and, more than anything else, allow the small slice of the American people you represent to feel that there is someone in Washington doing his or her level best to give them a voice.