



Dumb Politicians Won't Get Elected

Politicians can be progressives, liberals, conservatives, Democrats or Republicans, and right-wingers. They just can't be dumb. The American people will never elect them to office. Let's look at it.

For years, I used to blame politicians for our economic and social mess. That changed during the 1980s as a result of several lunches with Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., which produced an epiphany of sorts.



At the time, I had written several columns highly critical of farm subsidies and handouts. Helms agreed, saying something should be done. Then he asked me whether I could tell him how he could vote against them and remain a senator from North Carolina. He said that if he voted against them, North Carolinians would vote him out of office and replace him with somebody probably worse. My epiphany came when I asked myself whether it was reasonable to expect a politician to commit what he considered to be political suicide — in a word, be dumb.

The Office of Management and Budget calculates that more than 40 percent of federal spending is for entitlements for the elderly in the forms of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, housing and other assistance programs. Total entitlement spending comes to about 62 percent of federal spending. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that entitlement spending will consume all federal tax revenue by 2048.

Only a dumb politician would argue that something must be done immediately about the main components of entitlement spending: Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Senior citizens indignantly would tell him that what they're receiving are not entitlements. It's their money that Congress put aside for them. They would attack any politician who told them that the only way they get Social Security and Medicare money is through taxes levied on current workers. The smart politician would go along with these people's vision that Social Security and Medicare are their money that the government was holding for them. The dumb politician, who is truthful about Social Security and Medicare and their devastating impact on our nation's future, would be run out of office.

Social Security and Medicare are by no means the only sources of unsustainable congressional spending. There are billions upon billions in handouts going to farmers, corporations, poor people and thousands of federal programs that have no constitutional basis whatsoever. But a smart politician reasons that if Congress enables one group of Americans to live at the expense of another American,



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then in fairness, what possible argument can be made for not giving that same right to other groups of Americans? Making a constitutional and moral argument against the growth of handouts would qualify as dumb.

Let's examine some statements of past Americans whom we've mistakenly called great but would be deemed both heartless and dumb if they were around today. In 1794, James Madison, the father of our Constitution, irate over a \$15,000 congressional appropriation to assist some French refugees, said, "I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents." He added, "Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government."

In 1854, President Franklin Pierce vetoed a bill intended to help the mentally ill, saying, "I cannot find any authority in the Constitution for public charity" ... and to approve such spending "would be contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Constitution and subversive to the whole theory upon which the Union of these States is founded."

Grover Cleveland vetoed hundreds of congressional spending bills during his two terms as president in the late 1800s. His often stated veto message was, "I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution."

If these men were around today, making similar statements, Americans would hold them in contempt and disqualify them from office. That's a sad commentary on how we've trashed our Constitution.

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