

**REMARKS BY JOHN C. DANFORTH  
RECIPIENT OF THE HARRY S. TRUMAN PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD  
TRUMAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY  
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Since I learned that I was to receive the Harry S. Truman Public Service Award, an honor I deeply appreciate, I've been thinking a lot about Harry Truman, not so much Truman the president with a long record of policy achievements, but Truman the person and politician. He lived as much as possible as an ordinary American, and he valued direct contact with ordinary Americans. Direct connection with average people was at the heart of his politics, and that connection is what politics always should be, but is not today.

I never had the privilege of meeting President Truman, but I had one memorable experience that gave me insight into the kind of person he was. After Mrs. Truman's death, their daughter Margaret wanted to give the family home on Delaware Street to the federal government. It turned out that she couldn't simply give the home to the government. The government had to accept it. That took an act of Congress. Tom Eagleton and I introduced the bill in the Senate, which, of course, passed without opposition. Not long afterward, I made a luncheon speech in Independence, probably Rotary or Kiwanis, where the local head of the National Park Service asked me if I would like to visit the home before curators arrived. They would decide which personal objects to keep and which to discard. I jumped at the chance, and spent a good part of the afternoon in the Truman home.

It appeared that after the President's death, Mrs. Truman had decided to throw nothing away, so everything was just as it had been when her husband was alive. It was as though President Truman had stepped out for a few hours, leaving me the run of the house.

His hats were on a hat rack. His walking canes were propped in a living room corner. In his second floor bedroom, his pill bottles were lined up on the dresser. I opened the closet door to find his suits neatly hanging in place, his neckties on a tie rack, his shoes on the closet floor. Recalling his comment that the first thing he did on returning to Independence was to carry his grips to the attic, I went to the attic. There were his grips as well as boxes upon open boxes of the sort of long forgotten items you would find in any attic.

What an afternoon. It had nothing to do with Harry Truman the world leader, or the President. It was a window into his humanity, into Harry Truman, the ordinary person whose everyday life was so much like yours and mine.

He was a man without pretense, a real person who never tried to be anyone but himself and never forgot where he came from. After the White House, he returned to Independence as he had left it, without wealth, and without the trappings of the presidency. He wasn't protected by a phalanx of Secret Service agents. The summer after he left the White House, he and his wife set out by car for Washington, New York and back, staying at hotels along the way, the former president at the wheel of his new Chrysler. He enjoyed his morning walks, not just for the exercise but for the opportunity to chat with the people he saw. He thought of himself as an ordinary American, and he enjoyed the company of ordinary Americans.

And that is how he went about politics. For him it was personal and it was energizing—the flesh and blood candidate among flesh and blood citizens. In his underdog campaign for President in 1948, he travelled by train, stopping in small towns and large cities, speaking in plain language about the issues of the day, trusting the people to make the right decision.

Crowds showed up in huge numbers wherever he stopped, whether at 6:30 in the morning or 10:00 at night. Sometimes it seemed as though the whole town had turned out. His speeches

were hard hitting and partisan. He relentlessly attacked what he called the “do nothing” Republican Congress. He hammered the issues of minimum wage and farm supports while his Republican opponent stuck to platitudes. He liked to say that everyone should know where he stood. And, what’s so different from today, he never attacked his opponent personally, not once, never even mentioned his name. He came from nowhere and won the election going away, all in a campaign that lasted less than two months. In sum, Truman’s campaign of 1948 was the opposite of what politics has become today.

Today’s campaigns don’t last two months, they take two years. Soon after the polls close for one election, the campaign begins for the next. It’s as though the main purpose of politics is to run for office, not to serve in office. Politicians once in the midst of the people are now kept far apart by security agents with bugs in their ears. Governors, key members of Congress, even the U.N. Ambassador now have security details.

Candidates spend more time with financial backers than with ordinary citizens. Now, the main way of communicating with voters is through 30 second media buys and 140 character tweets, rather than the in-person speeches of Truman’s time. Instead of flesh and blood contact with real people, politicians are remote images on TV screens, and politics is bloodless. Voters who once sized up candidates in person, and heard real arguments on issues now see made for media images and hear sound bites. And the sounds and images are not of the candidates. They are the hit jobs prepared by consultants who specialize in opposition research.

Harry Truman talked issues to the people and never mentioned his opponent’s name. Today’s campaigns consist of personal attacks and little else. In 30 seconds it’s impossible to discuss issues, but it’s easy to assassinate character. The result is that voters have little idea of where candidates stand on important questions. This is critical, because without information,

citizens lack the tools to decide the nation's future. So they go to the polls to choose between badly damaged personalities where their preferred choice would be "neither."

Harry Truman addressed ordinary citizens, but today's politicians do just the opposite. Their aim isn't to win the support of average voters but to energize the base of their party. They pitch their messages to true believers who vote in primary elections at the expense of average, less ideological voters who simply want government to function. The great fear of candidates, especially those in safe states or safe districts, isn't losing the general election. It's losing the nomination. So a new verb has entered the political lexicon, to be "primaried." Politicians who don't want to be primaried take positions that please activists on the ends of the political spectrum and they avoid the compromises necessary for government to work. The result is exactly what we see in Washington today, gridlock. And the consequence of a single minded appeal to ideological orthodoxy is that a great number of ordinary Americans, those in the political center, are treated as though they don't count.

Supreme Court decisions, most recently, Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, have further separated candidates and voters by inserting interlopers between the two. These interlopers are well heeled individuals and corporations that pour massive amounts of money into supposedly independent campaigns. It is bizarre that Congress can limit what an individual can contribute to a candidate, but, according to the Supreme Court, it cannot limit what an individual or corporation contributes to a Super PAC. The result is that a candidate who tries to define his or her own message is at a disadvantage to outsiders who want to do the defining. The Supreme Court has held that the willingness of a few to spend limitless funds on a campaign is the exercise of constitutionally protected free speech. But I don't understand the

First Amendment to protect the power of the few to interject themselves between candidates and voters and dominate campaigns.

The Bill of Rights guarantees essential freedoms, but it is not the entirety of the Constitution. The Constitution creates and guarantees a republican form of government, republican with a small “r.” And the Citizens United decision undermines our republican form of government. Here’s what our founders meant by a republican form of government: our representatives are chosen by and responsive to the public. This was the great principle underlying the American Revolution: “No taxation without representation.” Those who exercise power on our behalf should be people we choose, not people chosen an ocean away.

The politics believed in and practiced by Harry Truman consisted of a close relationship between voters and the candidate who sought their votes. It was the essence of a republican form of government. It depended on the physical presence of the candidate and his straight talk about issues. It was not reduced to sound bites and personal attacks. It was the opposite of politics as practiced today.

The reform of today’s politics calls for changes in the ways politicians do business and even more, it calls for greater participation by average citizens. In 1948, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands turned out to see the President at every whistle-stop. It’s hard to imagine even a fraction of such crowds today. No doubt one cause of the decline of public interest in politics is that politicians have written off ordinary people in pursuit of the energized base, but the cause is broader than that.

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has shown that since the beginning of the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, public participation has declined in a variety of activities from PTAs to bowling leagues. According to Putnam, most of us would rather stay home and watch TV than turn out

for any group activity, most definitely including politics. So we abandon politics to the professionals, the candidates and the consultants, and the ideologically extreme who gladly fill the vacuum we create by our absence.

If average citizens were to become active and were to speak out, politicians would listen. To win elections, they have to listen, so if we want to change politics, it's up to you and me to be much more active and outspoken than we are today.

How might we go about the work of fixing broken politics? How might we restore the relationship between citizens and politicians envisioned by our founders and personified by Harry Truman? Here are my ideas, you will have your own.

I believe that the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United undermines our republican form of government and should not stand. That's a long shot, because overruling it would require a dramatic change by the Court, which I don't foresee, or a Constitutional amendment which is exceptionally difficult. But, however difficult, we shouldn't foreclose thinking about campaign finance reform.

Other ways of reconnecting the American people to politics are more attainable. In an age of terror, the physical security of politicians is essential, but it comes at the cost of accessibility. We should always be aware of that cost and weigh need for security against its cost to our connectedness to government. If the risk is remote, we should resist creating the impression that government officials are a special class of people always surrounded by a retinue of guards. I was the only ambassador at the U.N. with a security detail. It created a bad impression unwarranted by a negligible risk.

More importantly, we should reform the format of campaigns. Thirty second TV commercials and five minute debate segments are not sufficient to present voters with real

choices on important issues. Compare the typical televised debate today and its lightning rounds of unrehearsed questions with the Lincoln-Douglas debates—seven three hour meetings on the single issue of slavery. Then, voters received extensive presentations on the most important subject of the day. Now, voters receive a few minutes of generalities. To advance reform, television stations might offer candidates extended blocks of time, perhaps 15 or 30 minutes, to make their cases to voters. Also, independent organizations like the Truman Library might sponsor candidate forums on important subjects such as the future of Social Security or America's role in the Middle East.

Finally, the most significant reform of all must be a greater willingness of average citizens to become what they were in Truman's day, much more engaged in politics. This means a higher percentage of citizens who vote, especially in primary elections. We should not leave the choice of candidates in the hands of a few. Also, it means greater physical presence at town hall meetings, candidate forums and other political appearances. It's important to let candidates know not only how we feel about issues, but how we feel about the way they conduct their campaigns.

Many of us ask ourselves why politicians act the way they do. Why do they duck issues? Why the personal attacks? The answer is that they behave this way because it works. It is the best strategy for winning elections. So, it's up to us to prove that it doesn't work, that we the people will no longer accept the current state of politics. When we the people get in the faces of politicians and insist on change, we will get change.

A lesson from Harry Truman is that closeness of politicians and the people is an important American value. An irony of modern history is that the rapid evolution from whistle-stop campaigns to media designed to bring us together, TV and Twitter, has in fact driven

politicians and public apart. Reconnecting the two would take contributions from several sources, hopefully the Supreme Court, definitely media and political professionals. Most importantly, it would take the dedication of countless ordinary Americans who will commit themselves to making politics work.