

# IS POLITICAL ETHICS AN OXYMORON?

by Walter M. Siewert

The University of Missouri - St. Louis' Center for Ethics in Public Life opened its doors in 2012, and as I was introducing myself as its new director, I began to notice a trend. In every new meeting, the idea of "ethics for politicians" provoked a knowing smile and a sad shake of the head and a comment like: "Is that an oxymoron?" Or "Well you've certainly got your work cut out for you."

Yet at the same time, all those I met who worked in the public sphere saw themselves to be serving a greater social good, itself a fundamentally ethical exercise. Is this one of those logically impossible situations in which everyone thinks he or she is a better-than-average driver, but not all can be? What is the truth about ethics in politics?

The truth is that politics is ethics.

Democracy is our answer to perhaps the most difficult ethical problem facing modern humanity: How do we ethically protect the social cooperation that makes our society strong, while also respecting the rights of individuals to pursue vastly divergent visions of the good life and deeply conflicting moral and political beliefs?

This is such a challenging question that the best human history has done is come up with a process to approximate an answer at any given time: democracy. Living in a democracy means living in a constant state of



**" . . . dismissing politicians (especially ones who don't agree with you) as inherently morally corrupt is like dismissing all the soldiers from either side in a battle as inherently morally corrupt."**

moral negotiation. "What is the best kind of society possible under these circumstances, and how do we get there from here?" is not a question with any kind of permanent answer.

Circumstances change and ideals evolve, even if the underlying values don't.

As distasteful as it may be, the best moral analogy for the democratic political process may be warfare. Before I venture further into this troubling analogy the memory of my own family's military service forces me to state an obvious but critical distinction: Although both serve the noble cause of the greater social good, politicians,

unlike soldiers, do not routinely risk violent death. Further, the analogy shouldn't be taken to imply that one's political enemy is morally equivalent to one's mortal enemy; this is not an uncommon and gravely consequential mistake (see: congressional dysfunction).

The purpose of the analogy is to illustrate that the political process, as war, is an ongoing moral tragedy. A moral tragedy is a complex situation in which no choice is morally clean.

Jean-Paul Sartre exemplified moral tragedy in the story of a youth torn between providing bedside care for his dying mother and enlisting to protect his country. The choice is a moral tragedy because whatever choice he makes the youth will be betraying someone: his mother or his motherland.

The soldier's choice to kill on the battlefield is a moral tragedy. Likewise, so are many of the choices politicians

face: Should I write a bill that clearly expresses a principle I firmly believe in or one I think can pass? Should I write this policy to violate some individual rights or have it fail to fully protect social well-being? Should I make this backdoor vote-trading deal or see my important initiatives fail? Should I make promises I probably can't keep and accept huge contributions from special interests or should I concede the race to my opponent?

In history, we have treated soldiers either as heroes or villains — there seems to be no in-between. Politicians are often subject to the same forced dichotomy. Perhaps we should pay more attention to their hero status even when they are just your local alderperson and even when their all-too-human imperfections mirror the imperfections of the process they are dedicated to.

This is not to absolve wrongdoers, of which there are plenty, of blame. The wrongdoers in public ethics are not the ones who vehemently defend a political position someone else just as vehemently disagrees with. They are the ones who undermine the process we have put in place to deal with precisely that situation.

The wrongdoers are the ones who seek power for their own sake, who serve their private interests while in the public space, who make deals on expediency, not principle, and cynically seek to manipulate this fragile democratic process rather than preserve it. We should hold these wrongdoers accountable, but not by indicting politicians as a class and turning our attention away from politics — doing so merely frees them to fulfill our worst expectations. Instead, we must hold them accountable to our best expectations.

In a democracy, dismissing politicians (especially ones who don't agree with you) as inherently morally corrupt is like dismissing all the soldiers from either side in a battle as inherently morally corrupt. It allows us to turn our minds away from an unpleasant truth, but it is an ethical failure on our part



**DEEP BENCH. COMPLETE FOCUS.**  
**LAUBER MUNICIPAL LAW, LLC.**  
[www.laubermunicipallaw.com](http://www.laubermunicipallaw.com)

816-525-7881

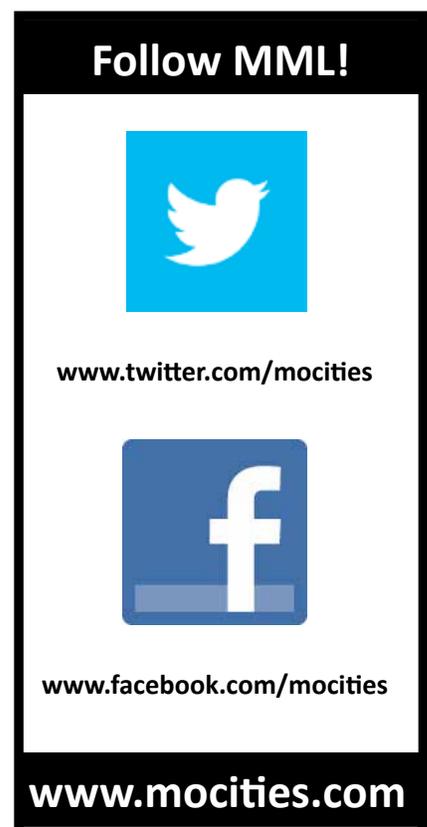
*The choice of a lawyer is an important decision and should not be based solely on advertisements.*

**Learn more about political ethics at the MML Annual Conference!**  
**This topic is the pre-conference focus on Sunday, Sept. 20. Check for details on the conference program on page 16.**

as citizens just as surely as cynical, self-serving behavior is a failure on behalf of a public servant. □

**Prof. Wally Siewert** is the director for the Center for Ethics in Public Life, University of Missouri-St. Louis. He may be contacted at [siewertw@umsl.edu](mailto:siewertw@umsl.edu).

*This piece appeared originally in the St. Louis Beacon, now merged with St. Louis Public Radio. Follow ongoing coverage of news and public issues at [www.stlpublicradio.org](http://www.stlpublicradio.org).*



**Follow MML!**



[www.twitter.com/mocities](http://www.twitter.com/mocities)



[www.facebook.com/mocities](http://www.facebook.com/mocities)

**[www.mocities.com](http://www.mocities.com)**