



Mike Haridopolos on Politics, Power and Navigating the Legislature | Nov. 28, 2021
LTIS Episode 3

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Legislatures: The Inside Storey,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. Your host is Tim Storey, the executive director of NCSL. Tim talks with legislators, journalists, academics, political analysts, authors, and others about the ideas and policies shaping state legislatures today.

Tim’s guest for this podcast is Mike Haridopolos, former Senate president in Florida. Haridopolos is a former college history teacher and author who first joined the Florida House in 2000. He then served in the Florida Senate from 2003 to 2012. He served as president from 2010 to 2012. He now runs his own consulting firm and works frequently with political campaigns.

Haridopolos discusses his own path in politics, the challenge in keeping a caucus together, offers some advice for aspiring leaders, and shares a few thoughts about his political heroes.

Here’s their discussion.

Tim: Hello Mike Haridopolos. I am so really, really grateful that you are taking the time to be on our somewhat fledging podcast. We’ve had several episodes in the tank now, but it’s

something I really love doing, partly because I get to connect with guys like you, people who I have respect for and who I've gotten to know over the years. You and I have worked together on I don't know... I've lost track... a number of times to try to frankly mostly go out and try to help other legislatures. So, I've always been super grateful that you're willing to share your time and your expertise, and I know you're really good at that.

Time Marker (TM): 01:48

Tim: So, when I was thinking about former legislative leaders who I'd love to talk to in order to get their perspective on how legislatures have changed and what it takes to be a good legislator, what it takes to be a good legislative leader, you were top of the list. So, I really appreciate you taking time to do this.

Mike: Well, you're very generous. I appreciate that very much. I enjoy working with NCSL. I mean, it's the best way for learners to see what other states are doing. You guys stay on top of that knowledge and it's so important, and it's nice to meet other legislators across the country, and how unique our 50 states are.

As a former history and political science professor, it's neat to talk to folks in their real experiment called federalism, because we are different places, and we are not a government that believes that one size fits all. It's nice to see what other states are doing. What we try to do is find successful models in other states. We try to do that in Florida and sometimes we're the ones that have models that other people follow.

So, it's a great opportunity. It's always a pleasure to see you and I'm looking forward to our conversation today.

TM: 02:50

Tim: Cool. That's what we're all about. That was a pretty good capsule there, so I might put you on the payroll here and have you go out and do that; that's really great.

So, you kind of touched on it – history professor – but you have a very interesting background. You've mentioned your father at times before. Tell us about ... you don't have to start at the cradle but go back as far as you like and tell us about where you grew up. Again, you've got an interesting backstory. So, where you grew up and what you went into and what led you eventually to be the president of the Florida Senate.

Mike: I've had a very blessed life. My dad is a former FBI agent. He was actually born in Athens, Greece, so I'm a first-generation American. My mom grew up in Arkansas of all places. They met when they were both working for the FBI. They're still married today. My dad just turned 90.

We moved around a bunch when I grew up. We lived in Long Island, New York, New York City, Fayetteville, Arkansas, back to New York. So, I saw a lot of the nation and I always had great respect for our nation. Growing up through the years, I fell in love with U.S. history. It's just an amazing story. And I eventually became a history professor after graduating from college at Stetson and later the University of Arkansas. And went on to become a teacher here where I live even today in a place called Melbourne, Florida. It's eastern Florida.

I also taught at the University of Florida, where I taught classes in history, political science, and I also write books. In fact, my newest book, "The Modern Republican Party," just got published a little over a year and a half ago and it's done well. And I really, as a teacher, want to make sure that people know the whole story.

I am a proud Republican, of course, but as a professor what I was really pushing was the idea of base your political philosophy on how you live and knowing both sides of the story. I'm always frustrated by some professors who try to push their ideology. I always try to say here are the facts according to my opinion but ask me any questions you want.

That was kind of my political style as well. After teaching for seven years at the community college level, I entered a race for the Florida legislature, knowing a lot about the academic part of it, still kind of learning the political side and said, you know, I'm going to run a traditional, grassroots campaign and let's see where it takes us.

TM: 05:10

Tim: Let me just quickly interrupt. Why did you decide to run? Did somebody come talk to you or were you active in the county, GOP? What made you decide to run?

Mike: Again, I always had a fascination with history, of course, teaching it, and politics. I grew up when Bill Clinton was actually the governor of Arkansas. He won the first time and then lost after his first two years in office as governor. I kind of saw that firsthand. I was always intrigued by it. John F. Kennedy was kind of my political hero growing up along with eventually Ronald Reagan. I was always intrigued by politics, how things get done, etc.

And so, after teaching at the college level and volunteering for some political campaigns, I became good friends with our congressman, volunteered from working in the office on the back end licking stamps and getting out mailers and taking him to events and seeing the interactions they went through.

I was getting really frustrated during the Bill Clinton years as president because I felt like a lot of people, when the whole Monica Lewinski scandal came out were more concerned

about being on TV than they were about solving problems. And, as a teacher myself and trying to educate these young adults on life, it was either kind of put up or shut up.

So, I said you know what? I really like what Jeb is doing as governor. He was reducing taxes, giving more school choice, trying to find a balance on the trial lawyers, balancing budgets, really making Florida an attractive place to live, I said you know what? I really like what this guy is doing. I want to help him do that. And we had some issues in our community that were really important and the issues that really drove me were obviously education, and the second was taxes.

I was actually shocked when I got my first real paycheck at how much I actually paid in taxes, and I wasn't making a lot of money. So, I really believe that people can spend their money smarter than politicians, let alone bureaucrats.

So, when term limits came up, people came to me and said: Have you ever thought about running for office? I gave it a lot of thought and said I'll do it, but I'm going to do it in a unique way. What really separated us in my first race is most importantly, in my opinion, was we knocked on doors starting January 1 of that election year. We saw 25,000 people face-to-face in a nine-month period before my first primary.

And every morning and every afternoon before and after work, I would wave on a street corner with a big sign... because my last name is Haridopolos, it had to be a really big sign... and our slogan as you recall, Tim, is: What's a Haridopolos? That was literally our campaign slogan. It was a fun way for people to ask the question to us about exactly who I was. Most people thought I was a sea turtle or a dinosaur at first, but we eventually taught them that I was a college professor here in town.

It was the best way to ever run a campaign because you really heard face-to-face what was on people's minds; not what you read in the newspaper or what the political science folks were telling you. People were telling me what was important to them, and they usually said: public safety, lower taxes and making sure that their kids have a solid education so that whatever they do, they can go out and find themselves in the world.

And those were really my issues that eventually I really focused on in the legislature.

TM: 08:22

Tim: And that was in Melbourne, Florida?

Mike: Yes. That was in Melbourne, Florida, the State House race. And so, people know in a House race in Florida, you're talking about--this was back in 2000--140,000 people in a House district. A very expensive race. I probably raised and spent over \$130,000 to \$140,000 and that was 20 years ago. Now in Florida, the cost of races because of mail, TV, radio, social media is getting astronomical. I really cut into that cost because of

knocking on doors, waving on street corners. It really accentuated the media I eventually paid for.

TM: 08:58

Tim: Do you remember what your margin was?

Mike: I won my first race. It was a seven-way Republican primary. I won 49% of the vote. The second-place person had 17% of the vote. And then I won my first general election with 65% of the vote.

Tim: I assume it's a pretty Republican district to start with?

Mike: It is. I think that year in 2000, Bush beat Gore like 54/46 or 55/45. So, I did a little better than the average. It was a good number. I attribute it a lot to, again, really personalizing the campaign. If I knocked on your door, you got a handwritten postcard from me saying thanks for your time and attention, and I really stayed on top of that in my years in office.

TM: 09:43

Tim: But you also raised a bunch of money and had to do those channels. Let's jump ahead to one of the questions, how have things changed. We'll take about legislatures, but I think campaigns have changed so much. I mean, what's a Florida district now? It's probably close to 200,000 in the House.

Mike: Yeah, if you're going to run for the state House, you're talking about a quarter of a million dollars. When I eventually ran for the Senate, if you were in a competitive race, you're talking about a couple million dollars.

TM: 10:08

Tim: Right. So, can you still knock on doors and win a race and stand on the street corner, or it's just far more sophisticated now? And when you won, you did both, right? You were out of the street corner, and you were doing it yourself. I assume you had some surrogates too who were helping you. What really mattered? Was it spending the money on radio and cable access, whatever TV was back then, or was it the retail stuff, and can you still do that today?

Mike: That's a fair question. I think the answer is yes, you can still do it today, and I think that you have to put those grassroots in to raise the money. What I found was that I raised the first \$20,000 or so among people who already knew me. And the rest of the money came from people I met along the way.

If you're an incumbent, of course, it's a pretty easy thing – going to the usual tax lobbyists, interest groups, etc. – you're well known, business leaders, you can imagine. But for your first campaign, I think you have to put that sweat equity in, for lack of a better term, in order to find success. I also think it makes you appreciate it more when you work that hard for it.

To give you an idea of how much you have to put the two together is that we walked on doors from, as I mentioned, January till about the middle of June. And then we did a poll. And in that poll, we were thinking we'd knocked on by that point 15,000 doors, we'd been out on the street corners all this time. We had not put out any mail other than thank you postcards.

I was saddened and shocked by the fact that I only had like 19% of the vote, but I also saw that my closest competitor only had about 4% or 5% of the vote. This was in a seven-way race. But then when I put the mail and TV on top of it, which was really that commercial I talked about: What's a Haridopolos? It boomed up our numbers. In my opinion... we did a poll behind it, it reminded people oh yeah, that's the guy I saw waving on the street corner. Oh, that's the guy who came by my house. That's the guy where I saw a bumper sticker on the back of my friend's car.

You need both of those elements. I think if you just try to "buy the race," it's not possible. Or if you just try to do grass roots, it's not possible. I still run congressional campaigns now. I say build that grassroots organization. Then it's like you're building a building – you have a really strong foundation of support and then you can launch up.

So, when you ask for money after you've knocked on 5,000 doors, it becomes a lot easier. When you tell the lobbyists or interest groups that might want to be interested in this race and say hey, I've done x, y, z, they're much more likely to help you as opposed to a person who has not put in that sweat equity.

TM: 12:51

Tim: You get elected to the House. So, how long were you in the House before you jumped to the Senate?

Mike: I was in the House for one term. I got reelected. I actually had a Republican challenger, which shocked me.

Tim: In your first race?

Mike: My first race. We kind of set a message. We won over 80% of the vote in that primary. And then in the general, I think we won even bigger, so it was a pretty one. I don't think any Democrats ran against me. I was in the second term and sadly, my state senator passed away. I was approached by different people who said: You should run for the

Senate, because in essence, that's where the action is. The House is already pretty darn conservative. We want to see that Senate move to the right, especially on financial issues.

It was a tough decision because you have to give up your seat as you know to run. So, I gave up my House seat, to put it candidly, had the guts to run and give up the state House seat where I was in the path to leadership there. And I did the exact same thing in a special election, just condensed. Went out and raised a bunch of money because not only did I have my home community, but of course now the other interest groups knew who I was. And luckily, no other House member after seeing me get in, seeing people get behind me right away... said no, I'm not going to take on this guy.

The day that qualifying was over, then Jeb Bush endorsed me; he didn't endorse me prior. I went on to win I think almost 90% in the primary against kind of an unknown person, and then won approximately 65/68% in the general. And I never had another election again. I got reelected in 2006, got reelected in 2010, and that was the end of it.

Tim: You know the saying about the best way to run for office is either terrified or unopposed. Those are your only choices.

Mike: Exactly. Your chances of victory go way up when you run unopposed.

TM: 14:38

Tim: So, now you were in the Senate and, again, term limits is a factor, so you can serve how many terms in the Florida Senate?

Mike: You can serve two full four-year terms. I had the opportunity to do that because remember, I had taken over a seat, so the first four years didn't count against me. That was an advantage. But with the way they draw the lines, you're really going to get two full... 10 years on average in the Senate anyway.

But I went in there as the lone wolf, meaning I was probably 10 or 15 years younger than most every other senator, especially in my caucus. And remember, because of term limits, most of the senators were people who had been there for a long time who had transitioned over from the House to the Senate because of term limits. And I was pretty darn conservative in contrast to my caucus at that point.

The trial bar had made a lot of inroads back then, even though the Republicans were in power, as did the teacher's union among leadership, not necessarily the rank and file. So, when I got there, I had a rough first two years, but my philosophy was take the long road here, don't try to shortcut this, make sure that people like you independently regardless of what your politics are, stay really respectful to people, stay in your lane,

meaning they knew I was really conservative on financial issues and I was really big on school choice and I was really big on public safety, meaning tough on crime.

I didn't venture out into other fields and try to become a know-it-all. I really focused on a few issues, and I really focused candidly also on recruiting new people to come to the Senate, and really recruited on being a darn good fundraiser, because I knew that not only for myself to get reelected, but I needed to raise money so I could help others get elected if I wanted to get in leadership.

TM: 16:17

Tim: OK, so that's the key. You come into the Senate already thinking I want to make a difference, I've got issues I care about, I want to pass a bill, but I want to be the Senate president. You thought about that pretty early on. Now, of course, with term limits, that game is really different in Florida because you're trying to get Senate president in your first term, right?

Mike: Yeah. And as you know, from Florida, in the House you're running the first day. In the Senate it's a slower process. It's a process that eventually took me about five to six years to accomplish, because that meant in the 2004/2006/2008 election cycles when there was an open-seat race, I never went against an incumbent. I would go out and recruit a candidate, support them big time, get them endorsed, raise the money, go knock on doors for them for that matter, and when you do that for someone, they're going to pledge their support to you to become the president of the Senate.

So, it took me four elections cycles, eight years in full to eventually clinch this. But it was all about attracting new members and also those members who had been there for a while saw me as not a maverick or a jerk. What I always did was I scoured through Republicans who were moderates on more conservative... then I'd say OK, what bills do they have that I like that I can help them with.

I'd cosponsor their bill, I'd talk to the committee chairman trying to get the bill on the agenda, I talked them up in the press on certain things. So, they'd say you know what? I'm not exactly aligned with Mike on policy, but he is a Republican and, unlike a lot of these other persons who are trying to become Senate President, he's actually helping me, trying to get my vote. And he's passing legislation, he's raising money, he's getting the endorsements.

It was an unselfish way of doing things for candidly a selfish mission, being the leader, but it's give-and-take. I think too many people try to fast-track it or find some magic potion. It's really about putting that sweat equity in, like I was talking about before, with campaigns.

TM: 18:23

Tim: And did you have... what was your race for leader like?

Mike: It was interesting because no one exactly knows how many votes a person has, and so as years went by, I knew how many votes I had. You literally have what's called a pledge card, signing the thing saying I would support and it's not public. And there were always rumors going around that so-and-so had such-and-such a vote. You always worry about that because you know what you have, but you don't know what you don't have.

And luckily, I was friends with some of my competitors. In fact, one of my competitors was my roommate... case on it... and one of the other competitors came to me... I'm not going to mention the senator's name, but he said hey, I'm getting really close to getting senator so-and-so on my team. And I looked at him and said OK, best of luck. I knew I'd already signed that person up three years ago.

And in the end, it wasn't a close race. I think it was a 26-person caucus at that point. I had probably 21 or 22 votes.

TM: 19:20

Tim: But it wasn't a cakewalk; you certainly weren't unopposed. You had to hustle.

Mike: Yeah, it was a four-way race that eventually one by one they stepped aside, and my roommate stepped aside probably a year and a half before it was over. In the final stretch, the rumor mill against me wasn't strong enough, meaning oh, we've got 11 votes and I was like OK guys, I know that it sounds really cool when you're talking at the restaurant or bar about how many votes you've got, but you don't have them.

My wife and I would literally... when I came home with a pledge card, it was a really big deal, a celebration that we had earned that vote along the way.

Tim: As they say... you know, there are so many sayings in politics; we've heard them hundreds of times. But one of them is when the train is leaving the station, you better get on board. Sounds like you had a little bit of that going on.

Mike: We did. We did at the end. And some people never joined the train because they were really upset that they didn't win, and they had a tough couple of years during my tenure.

TM: 20:17

Tim: I was going to say let's take a little detour. How did you treat those folks? It's a real world. I mean, you can't ignore this.

Mike: We had a couple of instances where people were not on the reservation, not so much with me, but with the caucus. One person actually helped the Democrats believe it or not, trying to defeat a Republican in a general election. That person never received a committee chairmanship even though they were in their last two years in office. Their office was on the same floor as the Democrats. They didn't have one of the pristine new offices or fourth floor offices we call them here in Tallahassee. And their legislation really didn't go anywhere unless it was something we really liked because they were really selfish.

If you're not going to be a team player, it's just not worth the effort, and you need to send a message that if you're off the reservation, if you're trying to undercut fellow Republicans and you're talking to the press and so forth, you're going to have a problem.

And then we had a member during my tenure who did much the same thing where he was talking to the press disclosing everything we were talking about in caucus meetings, etc., and he was not a good teammate. I had to remove him from a chairmanship. He was a person who supported me early and it was frustrating. I was unhappy to do it, but I have to reward those who are team players and if a person is being detrimental to the caucus, being selfish for the lack of a better term, you've got to have an appropriate reaction.

TM: 21:47

Tim: I think this is one of the tougher calls that leaders have to make and let's spend a few minutes. This is going so well. I've got 10/15 more questions. We're going to get to like two of them.

I think this is one of the tougher questions leaders have to make because how do you deal with that rogue member and if you cut them loose and you tell your lobbyist friends I'm not sure I'd have that guy carry my water or start taking away chairs and parking spaces and nice houses... you know, there's a price to pay for that.

But then there's also the price to pay for not addressing them because others in the caucus might start to look around and say hey, I can be an agitator and maybe get away with it. So, how did you weigh that decision when you dealt with those folks?

Mike: It was a really tough decision. The first one wasn't that tough because it became known that she had aggressively gone out and worked against... and it was in their home county, which is really abysmal. It was pretty obvious what was going on. And if I let that kind of be OK, it would send a terrible message, not just for my time, but in future times. So, that was a pretty easy decision.

The difficulty with that is that now you have a cancer in your caucus. Any misstep and they're whispering in people's ears. The same thing happened with the second person we had trouble with. And then you have other people within the caucus who are trying to go to leadership and they're trying to find that chink in the armor so that they can move up. And there is no better way to get someone than to tell... to use a big term, but how terrorists get other terrorists is that they say look at how bad the big, bad leader is, and I'm going to come and help you, and I understand what you're going through, etc., and they coddle them, and they become fellow agitators.

It was a tough road to climb, and my difficulty was as you know, during my presidency, we didn't have any money. We had a huge budget shortfall. We actually had to cut four billion dollars out of our budget. So, it's not like I can "buy people off" or soothe them over with member projects. It was all personality to keep them on the train, because we were making big budget cuts.

We had to reform Medicaid. We had to go in and change our pension system. These are all high-wire acts. In the end, instead of just one or two, you had five or six people really agitating because they were moderates or they had other agendas.

So, luckily, when I came into office, we increased our majority from 26 to 28. It was the largest majority ever in Florida history that I was able to bring in.

Tim: Out of 40, for people who don't know, right?

Mike: Yeah. So, I had in essence built up some of this leeway. But it was a tough road because it was such a tough budget time and you had to make these reform changes because, as you know, it's healthcare and pensions that are a big part of your budget. If you don't bring those into order, you can't balance the budget. I was not going to raise taxes to do so.

TM: 24:53

Tim: Did you try to work with the Democrats? Did you get them on anything? Did you have any success with the minority party?

Mike: No because it didn't make sense for them candidly. Why would they help us on the budget? And second, remember, the unions and the trial bar are the backbone of the Democrat party.

Now, what I did do with Democrats because I also... Look, I respected them because one, I served with them for a long time, and I thought they were good folks. They were elected just like I was. Almost 600,000 people voted for them in their districts. I gave some Democrats chairmanships, but I also gave every Democrat a vice chairmanship,

and I also respected the process even though I could have just run people over because we have a two-thirds majority.

I said every bill is going to be heard by at least three committees, so you're not just going to ram something through. Everyone is going to have the ability to hear it at least three times. So, whatever reforms we made or changes in law, everyone would have the ability to articulate it, and if they could come up with a better idea, they'd have three bits of that apple let alone on the floor of the Senate to go and challenge it.

I had a very good working relationship with my Democrat colleagues. In fact, one of my prouder moments was when I left the legislature, when it was my time to retire, as many Democrats came and spoke on my behalf and said we appreciate the way you treated us with respect even though you had a super majority.

TM: 26:15

Tim: A couple of things I want to get to before our time runs out and this is one of them, this whole question of what's changed in legislatures. You came in, in 2000, something like that?

Mike: Correct, in 2000.

Tim: I don't know if we've touched on this, but what do you do now?

Mike: I still write books. I'm the main political consultant for a few different congressional races. And I also lobby. I do a little of everything and I have the honor and pleasure to come and speak with NCSL groups about every year to talk to new leaders, which I love because I've been there and it's so interesting talking to new leaders. I think that's fabulous.

TM: 26:55

Tim: You're around the legislature, right? You understand how these places work now and 21 years ago. What do you think has changed the most? And I'm going to just tell you, I think civility is one. Is that overplayed, or do you think that's real, the problems with civility?

Mike: I think that's absolutely real and you're seeing it more in Washington than in anywhere else, and it's not just because of Donald Trump. It's Washington. It's both sides. We saw Joe Biden just recently going off the reservation and so forth.

So, that said, I think the problem is that too many people want to be on TV, going back to why I ran the first time. Too many people want to be in the newspaper, they want to tweet, they want to use Facebook, they want to blog, they want to get on MSNBC if

they're a Democrat; they want to be on Fox News. And the more controversial you are, the more attention you get.

I mean, you're already usually a Type A personality when you run for office. It's a drug. People are obsessed. They want people to pay attention to them. So, what you've seen is that the people who get on these shows are the most partisan and it gets them that attention, right or wrong. And I think that's a problem.

As I always say, any donkey can knock down a building. It takes a carpenter to build a building. And a lot of people love throwing stones because it attracts political contributions, it gets them a lot of ego strokes, it gets them on TV, they are "famous" or infamous, whatever you want to call it. That to me has hurt the civility, that people are thinking short-term as opposed to long-term.

TM: 28:26

Tim: And generally, about legislative change, what have you seen change in the 20 years, both in the Florida legislature, but I know you touch base with other legislatures as well?

Mike: Well, I think what you're seeing is too many people are trying to replicate Washington. I think that's a mistake. I think that states should be laboratories for democracy, and that's what our founders believed in, and it should be Washington following good ideas from the states, not the other way around.

And so, what happens is some people might consider the legislatures as the minor leagues versus the major leagues of the U.S. Congress. So, they see what they're doing in Congress and then they start playing the same games here in their state capitol. And they're really ambitious trying to get to Washington and trying to find that vehicle to higher office. I think that's always been a long impediment. And the way to get around that is who you select as leader really can change the dialogue of what's going on.

We've been pretty fortunate, especially in the Florida Senate, in my opinion. We've kept kind of that bipartisan at least atmosphere. Of course, we've enjoyed a majority since the mid-90s, but we are always respectful to the Democrat Party and my predecessors did that and the folks who came after me have done that where they show a lot of respect.

You don't see some of those hot debates that you sometimes see in the U.S. Senate, let alone in the House of Representatives, where in the House even in Florida, it's a more partisan atmosphere and you have the stronger personalities who are new to the game and think that's the only way to play.

The good thing about the Senate in a historical sense is most of the senators are either former House members who kind of learned the game and realized it doesn't pay to be

a bomb thrower, or they were major political or business in their home community and recognized that being a hyper partisan one way or the other is usually not a winning formula.

TM: 30:21

Tim: I mean, I would say back to your metaphor, and I know this is the way it goes – all the legislatures in the minor leagues. I always cringe a little bit when I hear that because I think it's really kind of absurd. The fact is, in my opinion, you can have far more impact on your state and on your community in state legislatures than you can in Washington, which is so broken in so many ways and unable to solve problems.

Now, I wish it would change, but it's been that way for decades now. I actually think maybe that's the seniors' tour; maybe it's more of a golf metaphor. The legislatures are the PGA and then maybe you get to go to the seniors' tour in Washington someday. I'll probably get in trouble with our lobbying folks.

Mike: And look, you know my background. I had the opportunity to go to Congress back in 2008 and I took your exact philosophy, which is I'd rather be president of the Senate in Florida with then an \$80 billion budget, today a \$100 billion budget, and a lot of say over that than go to Washington and just scramble for TV time.

The goal would be to be in leadership, sure, but I really wanted to move the Florida Senate to a more conservative place, and I really wanted to have an impact on some of the big issues that I ran on. So, I agree with you. I think if you want to "get things done," it's a lot more impactful to do it at the state level. In fact, sometimes, I've seen people go back to their county commission because they have a lot of say in the home community as opposed to just their state.

I think sometimes it's not the best from the legislature who go to Congress; it's the ones who are sometimes the most political that go to Congress, and that might be one of the reasons why we have so many problems in Congress.

TM: 32:08

Tim: I'm not going to comment on that... (chuckle)... but I do have some thoughts on it. Legislatures, I really do think, are where the action is. You can get so much done and it does baffle me sometimes why you would make that choice. I mean, you consulted congressional campaigns.

The other side of that is if you've got any close to a competitive district in either the primary or the general, how much time are you spending on the phone as a member of the U.S. House? It's just dial time all the time.

Mike: It's fundraising all day long and it's tough. And to our point earlier, the ones who are most partisan are the ones raising the most money.

Tim: Which is an interesting phenomenon. It's certainly the place we're at right now in American politics.

TM: 32:51

Tim: So, hey, certainly there will be some legislators listening to this; that's our hope and we know that they do. What do you tell those new members? Like, you want to have a successful run here. Now in Florida, you know your days are numbered. There is a date on the calendar where you will no longer be part of that body. It's not always the case with legislatures, but most legislators, the average legislative cycle is about 10 years. Some get in, get out fast because it isn't for them and it can be very consuming, especially if you want to be good.

When you were talking earlier about all that you did, I'm like good lord, the time you invested. It was your life, and it can be hard on families, right? You had a young family. So, back to that question, whether you know you're going in and out in eight or 10 or 12 years, or you're here for four or six years, what makes good legislators effective and then what... I always love to talk about the other side of the coin, like what derails members and puts them on the sidetrack and kind of the irrelevancy of being in that category?

Mike: The number one thing I'm always telling the newly elected is to remember why you ran. What issues drove you? That's what I always kind of kept in mind. Those are the issues that drove me. We talked about it earlier. Schools, taxes and public safety were my three issues. I didn't get off the reservation much on those.

And so, I took the leadership track, so I was a little bit different than most. Most people are going to be, candidly, rank-and-file members. What I tell those folks who aren't on the leadership track or don't want to do the leadership track, as you said, it's a burden on our families. I'm still happily married, we have three great kids, but that was a tough challenge.

What I've told people who are going to be that rank-and-file member or whatever it might be, even if you're in the minority, is be an expert in an issue you love and why you ran for office. Really become the go-to person on that issue. And if you're in the majority, you'll probably be the one driving that legislation in your time because they're going to have to deal with you because you are the expert and you can trip them up if they don't go along with your plan.

And even if you're in the minority, if you are really passionate about a particular issue and you're really focused in on it, the majority is going to recognize we'd better deal

with this person or they could derail our potential legislation because they know it so well, etc.

You can't be a jack of all trades. The ones who are unsuccessful, in my opinion, are the ones I talked about earlier, the ones who are the headline grabbers, they just want to be in the newspaper every day. They eventually blow themselves up in my opinion.

And the other ones that I think are unsuccessful are the ones who talk on every issue. If you're the one talking, I'm picking up that microphone on every issue in committee and on the floor, people will tune you out.

And so, what I always tried to do, what I told other members is only talk when it's absolutely essential for you to talk, whether it be your own bill or an issue that you're kind of seen as a leader on, so that you're not making it where people just tune you out. And I've seen that so often with even some talented members where they think they have to talk on every issue, and they get tuned out and they lose their effectiveness.

TM: 35:53

Tim: New members come in and I'm always thinking about how you get a reputation. Maybe you got it out of the campaign. Maybe it comes in and when we do our member trainings, I say be really aware that people are paying a lot more attention to you in this little ecosystem of the capitol, which is also kind of a bubble to itself. I mean, you will get a reputation.

Check me on that. Is that accurate? If I name any sophomore member of the Florida Senate, would you be like oh yeah, that's the rails guy; he knows everything there is to know about shipping by rail and infrastructure, whatever. Or that's the person who never knows when to shut up. Or that guy can't keep a secret, whatever it is.

How does reputation play into it?

Mike: 100%. That's what I'm getting at. Reputation is a big deal. To toot my own horn, my reputation coming in was hey, this guy really knows how to campaign, knows how to raise money. I wanted to be known as that. But I knew if I just spoke on a bumper sticker on every issue, I'd be a nobody. I had to really dig into issues.

What issues separated me – I became kind of the author of the property tax changes we made in the State of Florida. I really got into the issue, and it really became my issue. So, everyone knew that hey, if there's a tax issue, you'd better ask Haridopolos, and that's what they need to do.

I think the ones who don't do that make a mistake. And the other ones who make a mistake, as we talked earlier, are the ones who go to Tallahassee and go wow, look at all

the fun I can have and the bars and the restaurants and the men or the women, and they forget who got them elected.

That's another thing I tell legislators: every weekend, go home. Remember who put you in office. Remember the family that supported you on your way, because a lot of people who are unsuccessful are the ones who break up their families, or they think Tallahassee is where the action is in Florida, instead of going back home every weekend. That's where they make a lot of their mistakes.

TM: 37:56

Tim: And you'd tell your buddies in Congress the same thing I assume?

Mike: I would. I think they get back home pretty good, but, again, it's just a tough tumble and I just think in general, there's too much government. I think if they took more time off in Washington, it would probably be a good thing, because the states do a pretty good job.

Oftentimes I've said because Washington wants to control all the purse strings, it manipulates what could be going on really well in the states.

TM: 38:24

Tim: We do have to wrap it up. Man, I wish we had another hour or two.

Mike: I think we should do this every week. This would be great.

Tim: I'd be up for that. I do like to end with something that's a little takeaway. What are you watching right now? What are you reading right now? Tell people what you think is interesting and maybe how it plays into your history passion?

Mike: Well, as you know, I love to read. What I read every day is I read the Wall Street Journal. It is probably on the editorial page more right of center, of course. But their news reporting I think has actually moved a little bit left of center. So, I try to read that to get a big picture.

Of course, don't just look at politics. Look at the world, let alone business. But the best book that I would recommend... you know this very well, Tim, that I've always recommended to people is Robert Caro's book called "Master of the Senate." If people have an idea of who they think Lyndon Johnson was. The guy was masterful in the United States Senate and it kind of shows what he did, and in some ways, it was kind of the blueprint I took to become leader of the Senate.

It was to really get involved in an issue, work harder than anybody else, and do that. That's the one book I'd recommend to anyone who is interested in politics, especially at

the level of being a state legislator or thinking about that, to understand the commitment that it takes to make it to the top. It's a substantial one and you can't just play politics in your capital city. It's a year-round endeavor and you need to help people first, even though that's a longer road to success.

TM: 40:01

Tim: I can definitely see your earlier comments, that Caro and LBJ's... helped you figure some of this out. Obviously, you've had a successful run.

So, thank you again, Mike Haridopolos. You're a good guy, appreciate you giving us the time, and look forward to seeing you in person soon in some of our training somewhere around the country. Thanks Mike.

Ed: And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: "Our American States" and the special series, "Building Democracy." For the National Conference of State Legislatures, thanks for listening.