



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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### **Some Sage Advice for New Legislators | Dec. 14, 2020 | OAS Episode 115**

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

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*“We are still just people when we’re there and we’re away from our families. There are things at home that we get pulled from. And so, sometimes I think it’s more important that we just act like people and care for one another than really get involved with which side of the aisle do you hang your hat on.”*

That was former Maine Representative Matt Moonen and Alabama Representative Debbie Wood, guests on the podcast. They’re joining the podcast to offer some advice for first-time legislators elected this November. About 15% of legislators going into the 2021 session will be first timers.

Wood, a Republican, was elected in 2018 and is completing her first term. Moonen, a Democrat, was first elected in 2012 and retired this year because of term limits. He served as House Majority Leader.

*Time Marker (TM): 01:35*

I started by asking them what most surprised them when they first arrived in the legislature. Representative Wood’s thoughts:

Rep W: I think the thing that surprised me the most is the slow process. There are so many really important pieces of legislation that we need to pass to help people protect our constituents every year, but we’re just loaded down with bills that... well, how do I say this? ...that are more important to the representative than they are to the people.

And so, sometimes we get off track and we spend too much time on those types of legislation instead of the ones that are really needed within our communities.

*TM: 02:23*

Ed: Representative Moonen was surprised by all the things he didn't know and how many he found interesting.

Rep M: I guess what surprised me is all the things that you didn't know you cared about. You get assigned to a committee and you start digging into the subject area. All of a sudden, the stuff gets really, really interesting, all these issues that you've never even thought about or cared to think about before, and all of a sudden, you're really engaged and trying to find solutions.

I guess that's what surprised me. You find yourself caring about so many things that you never thought about before.

*TM: 02:56*

Ed: Representative Moonen also has some perspective on how to forge relationships with colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

Rep M: This is politics after all and there are politicians involved, and there are people who feel the need to speak on every single thing. And when that happens, you just start to tune them out. So, I guess in terms of building relationships with your own side, I would say only talk when you have something to say. People will pay attention and respect you for it.

In terms of the other side of the aisle, I guess what I would say is keep in mind that there is no such thing as permanent enemies and permanent friends. You may have somebody that you're working with from the other side of the aisle in committee or on the floor or whatever where you have a really vehement and fundamental difference of opinion or perspective on one issue, and then an hour later you've moved on to another bill and you're working with them because you find that you do have areas of agreement and there is some common ground that you can build from together.

*TM: 03:59*

Ed: Representative Wood stresses focusing on the personal as a way to connect with her colleagues.

Rep W: Well, I think that it's very important to be a people person, to find out what really motivates and draws individuals, find out about their families, their children, their grandchildren, what struggles are they in the midst of. Because we are still just people when we're there.

We're away from our families, there are things at home that we feel pulled from, and so, sometimes I think it's more important that we just act like people and care for one another than really get involved with which side of the aisle do you hang your hat on.

*TM: 04:40*

Ed: She also said a background in sales has helped her juggle the demands of her legislative role.

Rep W: Well, I guess my profession in sales really equipped me to handle it better than I think some of my colleagues because I've always been in sales, I've always been self-motivated. I've never really been on a payroll. I've had to produce in order to earn a living.

So, you answer your phone at 8 o'clock in the morning, you answer your phone at 11 o'clock at night. And so, I was used to doing that. Even during this pandemic I've had a lot of people who call, and I answer the phone and they just can't believe that I answered my phone. And I say well, that's what we're here for.

And they say: Well, what about your staff? And I say: On the House side, we don't have any staff. We are our own staff. And so, we answer our phone, or you get a recording.

So, I think that my profession actually helped me know the importance of being here when people need me.

*TM: 05:44*

Ed: Representative Moonen says recognizing your limits is key to managing your time.

Rep M: I'm a workaholic, so I like working all the time. Managing your time... I guess the advice I would give is to recognize that you can't do it all. We have approximately 2,000 bills introduced every session. As I was saying, you find yourself caring about so many more things. But if you try to do everything, you won't do any of it well.

So, you have to accept that there are issues you care about that you're not going to be able to work on. There are other folks, your colleagues, that are on the relevant committees doing the work on those issues, and you sort of have to put your trust in them, that they're going to do good work and bring a good product forward, and you have to focus on your work and make sure that they're trusting that you're going to bring a good product forward.

*TM: 06:36*

Ed: Keeping in touch with constituents takes a lot of different forms and you need to use all of them, Representative Moonen says.

Rep M: I would say make yourself available. There are very obvious ways to do that: making sure that they have your phone number, they have your email address, that you're connecting with them on social media and providing them relevant information about things that are going to affect them.

Maine is a small state, and our districts are small. The number of people we represent is relatively small. So, it's actually really easy to meet all of your constituents, get to know all of your constituents, see them in the neighborhood, all of those kinds of things.

So, because we're small and because of that, people have an expectation that they can access their elected officials. And so, if you aren't accessible, they're going to notice that and they're not going to reward it.

Ed: Accessibility for constituents is the key for Representative Wood.

Rep W: When someone calls you and they ask you a question, or today social media... anyone can reach you at any given time. And so, you have to be prepared to at least send a response back. I think anyone wants to hear from you.

We've had a lot of things that have happened through the pandemic: people not getting their unemployment and then calling and wanting help. I really try to do my best to reach out to all of those people and help them in any way that I can. And I think that's the most important thing: being accessible.

We see politics on television and it's really not a true picture of what politics is. If you are an elected official in a small community, then you need to be visible. You need to be where someone can get in touch with you. And that is what I try to do. I try to make sure that my office is open.

Now, when I say office, it's my real estate office. We don't have an office at home. We're not given telephones or anything like that. We put our personal cellphones out there so that people can contact us.

Ed: I'll be right back after this and we'll talk about saying no, working with lobbyists, and that one piece of advice they want to share with new legislators.

MUSIC Gene VO:

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Ed: I'm back with Representatives Wood and Moonen. Now, an unavoidable part of governing is making some people unhappy, whether that involves saying no or backing legislation that is unpopular with some segment of the community.

*TM: 09:35*

Ed: They're tough decisions, Representative Wood says.

Rep W: The first piece of legislation we passed when I walked into office was a fuel increase tax, and no one likes taxes. I ran on infrastructure because I was in office previously as a county commissioner, so I knew about infrastructure, roads and bridges and the crisis that we were in here in our state.

So, I ran on infrastructure, I ran on us rebuilding our state. So, we passed the gas tax and boy, that was difficult because a lot of people were very against that. We want good services, but we just don't want to pay for them. Or we already feel like we pay too much. And then there are people who think that we don't use their money properly.

*TM: 10:30*

Ed: Saying no is actually pretty easy sometimes, says Representative Moonen, but not when it comes to your friends.

Rep M: When I first came in, we were in divided government, so I worked with a governor of the opposite party, a Senate majority of the opposite party from my party that controlled the House the entire time I was there.

And so, because there were some fundamental differences on a range of issues, it was very easy to say no to them. Where it's harder is saying no to your friends. Think about the context of the environment we're in right now with the pandemic and budget shortfalls and unemployment and all of these things.

I mean, we're just not in a position to have the money to do everything we would like to be able to do. That's when it's hard to say no is when somebody is coming to you asking for support on something that you agree with, but you're unable to come up with the money to make it happen.

It is hard to say no, but it is ultimately your job. We have to have a balanced budget. There is only so much you can do in a given year. So, sometimes you do have to learn to say either no or just not now.

*TM: 11:35*

Ed: Lobbyists are a part of the legislative process, and I asked them how they handle those relationships. Here's Representative Moonen.

Rep M: These folks are smart, they are hardworking, and they represent their clients pretty well. It is their job to bring the perspective of their clients to policymakers. I would say it varies. Some lobbyists are employed by one nonprofit, for example. It could be a social service agency or whatever, and they do great work. There are just times they need the support of the state and they're there to talk to you about it.

And then there are other lobbyists who have a really wide range of clients. With lobbyists I actually think about the same thing I said about legislators, with no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, because if a lobbyist has a wide range of clients and a wide range of issues that they're working on, you could find yourself one minute agreeing with what they're advocating for and working with them to advance something, and then one or two bills later you may find yourself on the opposite side of them and working against what they want.

*TM: 12:46*

Ed: And Representative Wood?

Rep W: The lobbyists in Montgomery, they do a very good job, of course, courting, coming to see you, introducing themselves, making sure you know who they are. Of course, you see them more frequently when you try to pass legislation that affects the organizations that they support or that they work for.

And so, sometimes you're going to side with them, but not always. And you just have to remember that those individuals do not vote you into office. You work for the constituents that voted for you.

*TM: 13:21*

Ed: To wrap up, I asked my guests for the single piece of advice they would offer newly elected legislators. Here's Representative Wood.

Rep W: Well, first of all, I'd like to thank you. I'd like to thank them for running for office. I know that at times, especially during the 2020 season, it's just been so ugly and filled with divisiveness. I think that candidates oftentimes are pictured as people who are bad, who only want to do this for themselves.

But I can tell you with the people that I serve with, there are some great people in Montgomery. They're there for the right reasons. They're fighting for their children; they're fighting to make sure that education and industries and all those things happen within our state. And they really feel a sense of community for the whole state.

We have 67 counties. Most of us represent anywhere from one to four counties depending on the size. But we understand that if we make a decision that's bad for one of those counties, it can affect all 67.

So, in the end, we try to make decisions that will move us forward. And so, I hope that they think about that going in. The world wasn't changed in a day; you're not going to move a mountain tomorrow. But if you build those relationships and you work on solid, good legislation, it can happen.

*TM: 14:50*

Ed: And Representative Moonen.

Rep M: It might be a little different in Maine than other states because we are a state with term limits. Because of that, there is not a particularly long window to make an impact. We're limited after eight years and four terms.

So, I would say the number one piece of advice I would give is sort of conflicting advice because on the one hand, you have a short period of time to make an impact; on the other hand, you have a responsibility to think long-term. And it can be very easy to lose that long-term perspective when you know very seriously that you are only there for a short period of time.

So, it can be very easy to focus on what's right in front of you and what impact it's going to have immediately and not focus on the long-term needs of the state and the people that live there.

So, I guess my advice would be to keep in mind that government is so much bigger than you as an individual and the impact it has on the people of your state is so much bigger than you. And so, the more you can accept that and find an area where you can make a difference and a real difference for people and focus on that, that's what's really going to matter because ultimately your time is limited, and government will go on without you.

So, seize your moment while you've got it, but be sure to think big and think long-term.

Ed: Many thanks to both my guest for their time and perspectives.

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