

Narcissism: Why It's So Rampant in Politics

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Source: Speech to Joint Session of Congress/Wikipedia

Consider that two of the things narcissists most desire are money (i.e., *lots* of money) and power (the more the better). And these two assets can be tightly interwoven. Consider also that many of the individuals entering the political arena have *already* made their fortune, or inherited it. So what typically drives them is a lust for power, prestige, status, and authority. These (let's call them) "objects of admiration" not only gratify their need for self-aggrandizement by feeding their oversized ego. They also provide them with compelling evidence to confirm their sense of superiority to others—probably their most coveted need of all.

There's little question that politicians—especially those on the federal level— wield vastly more power and control than the average citizen. Moreover, privy to non-public, industry-related knowledge affords them all sorts of opportunities (blatantly unethical but not yet illegal) to substantially augment their income through "insider" trading and investments. For many of them (and here, as elsewhere, I'll resist the temptation to name names) their [appetite](#) for material riches can be insatiable. Which helps explain why it's not uncommon for them to leave office with far more wealth than when they entered it. At times the liberty that some of them can't resist taking with the public trust is so flagrant that (moralistically kicking and screaming) they actually end their careers behind bars.

One of the primary characteristics of narcissists is their exaggerated sense of entitlement. It's hardly surprising then that so many politicians (or narcissist-politicians) somehow think they "deserve" to game the system. After all, from their self-interested perspective, isn't that what the system is for? In their heavily self-[biased](#) opinion, if they want something, by rights it *should* be their's. So, nothing if not opportunistic, they take from public and private coffers alike whatever they think they can get away with. And given their grandiose sense of self, they're inclined to believe they can get away with most anything. Sad to say, in today's world of capitalistic [politics](#) their judgment isn't that skewed. Which is to say they're much more often right than wrong.

Exploiting their privileged position in such a manner hardly leaves them plagued with guilt. In general, [guilt](#) isn't an emotion they're prone to. How *could* they be if they feel entitled to the objects of their desire? In their minds their very ability to attain something must certainly mean it was merited. So it's only when they're caught with their hands deep in the till and their various efforts at denial have failed them, that they're ready to admit responsibility, and posture remorse. But even then, whatever alligator tears they might shed are calculated to lessen the penalties for their misbehavior—or the time that otherwise they might be required to spend in lockup.

Ironically, despite the steadfast ethical values they profess, these politicians can be viewed as "[moral relativists](#)" in that what they adamantly deem immoral for others is yet somehow acceptable for themselves. Whether we characterize the personal "allowances" they make as constituting a double standard or outright hypocrisy, these privileged concessions to self clearly broadcast their overblown sense of entitlement. Which is precisely what enables them to regard themselves as sufficiently *exceptional* to exclude themselves from the rules and standards they impose on others (as, for example, a gay—but still-in-the-closet—politician striving to pass laws designed to restrict gay rights).

Even before winning office, these individuals may have been inclined toward such "entitled thinking." But there's little question that once elected their newly elevated status promotes further exaggeration of this tendency—which, ultimately, must be seen as anti-social. As senator or congressman the whole nation has become one huge "[narcissistic](#) supply" for them. That is, the ego gratifications available simply from residing in congress are truly extraordinary: such an unusually prestigious role can't but pump up their [self-esteem](#) to levels that further confirm their bloated sense of self. Whereas before they put *themselves* on a pedestal, now the whole country obligingly seems to follow suit. Moreover, once ensconced in office they may well feel accountable to no one but themselves—free to play their competitive power games with impunity (and frankly, the public be damned).

Now perched high above the populace, they're especially vulnerable to the vaguely camouflaged bribes that routinely come their way. If they didn't arrive in office "pre-corrupted" (as it were), such temptations enormously increase the odds that whatever venality they brought with them will succumb to the various lures they're subject to. And so, with all the perks of office and fawning by lobbyists representing private interests (frequently ex-office holders themselves, taking advantage of crony connections to further amplify their income), they can begin to exploit people and institutions with faint awareness that they're doing so unscrupulously. And with their grandiose sense of self fully ignited, they can easily convince themselves that they deserve everything they receive—while experiencing little to no obligation to respond in kind (unless, that is, they've forged a "privileged" deal to legislate in behalf of their campaign benefactors).

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Beyond such pragmatics, implicitly believing that it's better to receive than give, narcissist-politicians' immense appetite for flattery, praise, and adulation is also abundantly gratified. Quite independent of professional achievement, they expect to be treated as superior. Their fragile psyche demands being admired and looked up to—and unquestionably holding high office almost guarantees that this ego requirement will be amply met. Such an enormous "fringe benefit," helps explain why so many of them become "[career](#) politicians," holding onto such psychological blessings as long as possible. In such instances, the chief reason for remaining an incumbent isn't to fulfill any idealistic aspirations. It's to "secure" their inflated self-regard.

In fact, much of their pompous demeanor and arrogant behavior is inextricably tied to this inflated sense of self stemming from their political "tenure." Curiously, even when they piously tout their [religious](#) convictions, it's done with such extravagant show that rather than reflect any sense of humility or submission, it betrays a smug grandiosity (as in, "I've received a message from God that this country needs my services and that I should therefore run for President!").

But while they may delude themselves that their country sorely requires their unique talents and skills, they experience little [motivation](#) to serve the citizenry as such. They've won their position primarily to serve themselves—and they can do so almost obsessively. The saying "Promises are made to be broken" rings particularly true for them. It's become almost a joke that the devout pledges they make on the campaign trail bear only trifling resemblance to what they do once in office. The ability to convince voters that they'll best represent their interests is what defines their success. Actually *implementing* what they avowed they'd tirelessly work for isn't really an essential part of their agenda—which is typically well-hidden from constituents (and many times from their conscious selves as well). In short, their campaigns measure how well they can dupe the public, not how well they'll fulfill their responsibilities once declared victorious.

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Ultimately, as regards honoring their compact with the public, whether they're Democrats or Republicans is much less important than their character structure. And it's unfortunately the latter that determines how well they'll serve the people who elected them. This distinction between party and [personality](#) is crucial. For collectively, our politicians—by and large our *narcissist* politicians—really do run the country, regularly making decisions that affect the quality of our lives: our privacy and civil liberties, the [education](#) we receive, the social safety net so many of us depend on, the preservation and purity of our [environment](#), the wars we engage in, the people and groups we discriminate for and against . . . even the food we put on the table. And our welfare is almost always at variance with those of the corporations and the (one percent) wealthy elites, whose lavish funds are so instrumental in putting such politicians in office in the first place.

Notorious for being empathy-challenged (though they may be extremely adept at masking this deficit), narcissist-politicians are frequently tone deaf as regards how some of their private, "entitled" actions can affect public opinion. Compartmentalizing their lives, they suffer from a peculiar moral myopia and lack of imagination, unable to anticipate how their sexual infidelities, or barefaced bribe-taking, might be held against them. In this sense, their exaggerated sense of privilege frequently undermines their better judgment. As cold-hearted and calculating as they can be—for they see others as essentially objects to manipulate for personal gain—they're strangely naive (or even [unconscious](#)) about how their unprincipled acts could be negatively interpreted by others, who *don't* necessarily assume such behaviors as "entitled" at all.

Closely linked to their amoral or illegal actions is the dominance their office bestows on them. It's this power—or the "corruptibility" inherent in this power—that can create in them a reckless sense of invisibility. How else explain the foolhardy risks some of them take?—heedless, hazardous behaviors of such magnitude that the layperson can be left nonplussed, mystified, or downright appalled. "Is *this* the person I voted for?" they must ask themselves. No wonder that news headlines about their dalliances, debaucheries, and assorted depravities have become commonplace.

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And then, of course, there's all the cover-ups and prevarications intimately connected to their various acts of entitlement. [Lying](#) on Capitol Hill abounds, and it can be executed with relative impunity since politician claims, however improbable, go largely unmonitored. (Truth-checking on the part of corporate-owned media seems increasingly rare these days.) Besides, no one equivocates or dis-informs with greater

conviction than the narcissist-politician, whose blatant disregard for facts can at times be mind-boggling.

It's no coincidence that pathological lying has traditionally been perceived as a narcissistic trait. Which is almost intuitive in terms of [understanding](#) the related narcissistic tendencies to be arrogant, grandiose, contemptuous of others, interpersonally exploitive, ruthlessly competitive, hypersensitive to criticism, preoccupied with appearances, and manipulative of others' impressions of them. On the contrary, honesty or straightforwardness *doesn't* characterize them. For to reveal what they're really thinking and feeling—or the true motives driving their behavior—would be to render themselves more vulnerable to others' judgment than their fragile (though artificially inflated) egos could bear.

Eventually coming to believe their own falsehoods, they're fiercely defensive, and even attacking, when their illogical, inconsistent, or even contradictory, positions are questioned. Expert at lying to themselves, as well as to others, their inability to experience much guilt when they're found out is easy enough to comprehend. And tied to this distorted sense of entitlement (or "personal exceptionalism"), they can't really feel genuine sorrow for what they've done to betray the public trust.

Frankly incapable of emotionally identifying with others' distress, the wrong they may have done them remains forever out of their focus. What is in focus for them is the deeply felt assault to their [self-image](#) that comes from being charged with wrongdoing. And, so threatened, their push-back reactions are self-righteously contrived to reclaim both their personal and ideological superiority over their attacker. Flagrantly falsifying facts and details beyond reason, they vehemently proclaim the moral high ground. Which is to say that many politicians deserve to be rewarded honorary doctorates in Rhetoric and Verbal Acrobatics (dual major, indeed!).

But finally, is it possible that narcissism might just be an unintended prerequisite for being a successful politician? For to be elected to public service would seem to require a level of ambitiousness that may intimately relate to core narcissistic drives. As Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist at the University of Washington, reflects: "How many of us would have the desire, much less the ability, to promote ourselves ceaselessly? You have to do that as a politician. It's an amazing level of self-[love](#) . . . and need for affirmation."

And speaking of "ceaselessly," the narcissist-politician's ambitiousness might well be viewed as insatiable. That is, they're always seeking to *be* more, *have* more, *get* more. Regrettably, they illustrate perfectly the Roman philosopher Epicurus' dictum: "Nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little." In other words, their desires have no end point. Their inexhaustible appetite for wealth, recognition, adulation, influence and power winds up being a travesty. To go outside America, such insatiability is most pathologically—and farcically—exemplified by Saddam Hussein's literally cheating his country out of billions of dollars to "adorn" himself with some 75 shamelessly opulent palaces.

Which is reminiscent of another saying: that "you can never get enough of what you don't really want." And it's been noted countless times that what, typically, narcissists crave most (though it's so deeply repressed that they're hopelessly unaware of it) is the unconditional love, acceptance, and belonging they felt deprived of in growing up. So the outward trappings—or symbols—of fullness or fulfillment they so diligently pursue

can never really satisfy them. Their single-minded, misguided quest for *self-enhancement* can never fill the enormity of the void that exists at their core.

Because they don't realize that their ancient narcissistic injuries can never be healed through the objects of this world, there's a tremendous futility in their seeking. And because to deny their vulnerability they defensively objectify everything—themselves included— their lives may teem with gratifications that provide only solace for their heart's actual desire. Given their detached, cynical approach to life, their gravest doubts about their lovability are unresolvable. And their prodigious compensatory efforts remain forever off target.

But most tragically, as they "successfully" rise to prominence and power, the whole diseased condition of their lives infects us as well. For in devoting their lives almost exclusively to selfish, ill-conceived goals, the needs of the larger community surrounding them either get ignored or abandoned. Inevitably, we all suffer from the fraud that so thoroughly envelops them.

NOTE 1: I'm quite aware that many of the points in this piece may seem overgeneralized, or extreme. Fiction writer John Barth, when criticized about the liberties he took with his characters, replied paradoxically in his defense: "I exaggerate for the sake of truth." Hopefully, any hyperbole in this piece will be taken by the reader in the same spirit.

NOTE 2: Though from different vantage points, I've written quite a few blog posts on this intriguing/exasperating subject of narcissism. Here are some titles (and links):

["Outrage and Outrageousness: On Trump's Popularity," Parts 2 & 3,](#)

["Can You Help Narcissists Become Less Self-Absorbed?,"](#)

["What Narcissists REALLY Want—and Can Never Get,"](#)

["The Vampire's Bite: Victims of Narcissists Speak Out,"](#)

["9 Enlightening Quotes on Narcissists—and Why,"](#)

["6 Signs of Narcissism You May Not Know About,"](#)

["The Narcissist's Dilemma: They Can Dish It Out, But . . . ",](#)

["Narcissism: Why It's So Rampant in Politics,"](#) [the present post]

["Our Egos: Do They Need Strengthening—or Shrinking,"](#)

"LeBron James: The Making of a Narcissist" (Parts 1 & 2), and

"Reality as a Horror Movie: The Case of the Deadly Sweat Lodge" (Parts 1 & 2—centering on James Arthur Ray).

NOTE 3: If this post in some way "speaks" to you, please consider passing it on.

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