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Garrison Nelson, John William McCormack: A Political Biography

Theresa Marchant-Shapiro
Southern Connecticut State University

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Theresa Marchant-Shapiro
Southern Connecticut State University

I have always loved hearing and telling stories in both my personal and professional lives. It seems to me that a good story is the most effective way to make the objective, sometimes dry, results of political science research come to life. As a result, I truly appreciate a good story teller. One political scientist that I would rank among the discipline's best story tellers is Garrison Nelson. I look forward to attending his panels at conferences because of the stories he shares about real world politics—stories about politicians who are real people interacting in very human ways. As a culmination to his career, Nelson tells the story of former Speaker of the House John McCormack, a story of a very human man, but also the story of how politics works at the ground level. The pages of *John William McCormack: A Political Biography* interweave accounts of McCormack and his contemporaries in a narrative that is ostensibly about his life, but on deeper reflection also about political leadership in general. For me, the book's account of interactions between individual politicians weaves together three major themes regarding political leadership: alignment between the leader's persona and the local culture; the role of mentors; and the importance of interpersonal connections in the political process.

Many times as political scientists we focus on political institutions, forgetting that while they define the battleground on which politics is fought, politics is a human endeavor. Just as generals make a difference in the outcome of battles, individual politicians make a difference in the outcome of political conflict. Tip O'Neill popularized the phrase, "All politics is local." In this political biography of John McCormack, Garrison Nelson shows that the principle goes well beyond O'Neill's argument that politicians should not lose sight of the needs of their

constituents. Political success is contingent on a leader's ability to connect individually and collectively with their constituents, their mentors, their competitors, and their colleagues.

One overarching theme of the biography is the need for politicians to align their personal persona to the cultural climate of their constituents. McCormack was born and raised in South Boston at a time of Irish dominance. Because McCormack grew up in Southie, his only access to politics was through the Irish gatekeepers. In order to gain access, McCormack told an origin story throughout his life in which he claimed to be Irish. Like the Horatio Alger stories he loved so much, McCormack talked of his widowed Irish mother and his own efforts to pull himself up by his bootstraps. While McCormack certainly overcame difficult circumstances and did so with only an eighth grade education, the rest of the story is tenuous. In his relentless search for supporting documentation, Nelson was able to uncover information revealing several inconsistencies in McCormack's origin story. First, while his mother's parents did hail from Ireland, she was actually not born there. Second, she was not a widow—her husband had abandoned her and the children. Finally, and most damning of all, McCormack's father was not Irish; he was of Scottish descent. Worse yet, his father had come to Boston by way of Canada. Historically, Irish Boston saw immigrants from the maritime provinces of Canada (who were predominantly of Scottish descent) as a threat because they competed for the same resources—particularly jobs. The senior McCormack's maritime background not only made it difficult for him to find work in Boston, it also limited the younger McCormack's own access to power. As a result, over his lifetime McCormack repeatedly concealed his father's origins both in his personal accounts, but also on official records (birth, death, census, etc.) and tombstones. McCormack transformed his history to reflect his identity within the Irish culture of South Boston.

Another theme of the book is role of personal mentors in developing the leadership styles of politicians. McCormack did not merely go through the gatekeepers, they (and many other mentors) became rich resources in his development as a leader. After being abandoned by his father, John took a job delivering telegraphs. Later he worked as a clerk in a law office. This gave him the opportunity to read the law and later pass the bar. McCormack's first foray into politics was as a delegate to a state constitutional convention. He then volunteered for WWI, but once he returned to Boston, he parlayed his earlier connections from the constitutional convention into election to the General Council. The best known of McCormack's early mentors was Boston Mayor James Michael Curley. In addition to the Irish Curley, McCormack also counted among his early mentors Boston Brahmins and Boston Yankees. Each of them led by emphasizing their unique strengths. McCormack capitalized on their varied tutelage by choosing the best of each to incorporate into his own unique leadership style.

A final theme of the book is the importance of personal connections in getting anything accomplished. During McCormack's time both in the state legislature and in the US House of Representatives, he was able to build strong ties with diverse groups of colleagues. Although McCormack frequently built ties to those with whom he had an interpersonal affinity, he also constructed ties to those with personal power. For example, in the House of Representatives, McCormack built strong ties with Southerners—the bloc of the Democratic Party without which Northerners were unable to govern. One of the most powerful connections described in the book is the connection between McCormack and Sam Rayburn—who preceded McCormack as Speaker of the House. These two formed the original Austen-Boston connection that allowed the two wings of the Democratic Party to cooperate in the governing process, even in the early years of the civil rights movement. Based on the connections he created with his colleagues,

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McCormack was able to build coalitions to support the creation of various policies. Nelson's historical account of McCormack's leadership is a powerful reminder of the ability of old-time transactional politics to get things done. Modern politics is so polarized that we occasionally forget that disagreements over policy do not preclude our ability to build personal relationships. The best legislation is formed when those with different perspectives cooperate in an environment of mutual respect. Thus, the ability to build truly human connections is central to political success.

This biography is a fitting culmination of Garrison Nelson's professional career. Nelson met Speaker McCormack as a young professor, working to complete his dissertation. They had an enjoyable hour-long chat, talking about the Speaker's friends and colleagues. Intrigued by this charming and accessible leader, Nelson began collecting information about him only to discover that McCormack was anything but open about his own life. As one person confided, "John McCormack was the most secretive man I ever met" (ix). That discovery prompted Nelson to a lifelong pursuit of information connected to the life of the former Speaker—including the solution to the puzzle of his secrecy. McCormack kept his personal past a secret because transparency would have revealed his misleading claim of an Irish identity. Nelson's perseverance is manifest in each of the more the 700 pages of text. He pays amazing attention to detail as he tells the story of McCormack's life as it interweaves with other leaders of his time. This labor of love is not only an excellent contribution to our understanding of the role of individual leaders in the political process, it is also a fitting tribute to the contribution of a true scholar to the discipline of political science.