

PROFILES IN CITIZENSHIP: HOW TO KEEP THE REPUBLIC



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Peter Orszag

Economist Peter Orszag knows that getting the right policy answer while balancing the pressure from politicians to get the right political answer can be a challenge. The former director of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was back in the private sector when we spoke with him on December 3, 2010. Here's some of what he had to say as reflected on his years of government service and how he got there.

On public versus private service:

The thing I would say about government versus business and applying what you have learned, is that especially in places like the Council of Economic Advisers or the National Economic Council, etc., the breadth and depth is unmatched compared to most other settings. In terms of getting exposure to lots of different areas, it's difficult to beat. On top of that is, of course,

whatever benefit one derives psychologically from a sense of public service. What I say is as long as you feel like you are contributing to forward progress, the return in terms of your sense of self is extraordinarily high.

On keeping the republic:

I think the single most important thing at this point is to resist the strong trend towards polarization that is hollowing out the middle of the political spectrum and making evidence-based debate difficult. So that means toning down the volume on either left or right medium streams on cable news and on the blogosphere. And there is a broader point to that, too, which is that most of us have grown up, and I think it's still the case for college freshmen, where the mental attitude that one takes towards something that's written on a piece of paper or something that is said on the airwaves, the default is that it is true. We've been trained that if we read something in the newspaper or see it on the Internet it must be true. The probability that it is correct is not anywhere as near as high as it was at some point. We need to move to an attitude where when we see something or hear something or read something we don't automatically assume and give it the benefit of the doubt, unless it's coming from a certain trusted source. . . . [T]his is a huge problem, I think, because it is difficult to have the kind of democracy that we want and need when the debate often occurs at this level, where it's just kind of bombs being thrown back and forth.