



JFK asked us to serve our country, but we Americans have been mostly asking what our country can do for us since at least the 1980s. Republican politics especially has been of the “me first” variety. Is it time to ask what we can do for our country again?

ALTOONA, WI - For the last several decades, American politics has been “me politics.” Reflecting on the [famous line](#) in John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address, it’s hard not to notice that we Americans have been mostly asking what our country can do for us since at least the 1980s.

In their own ways, both major parties mirror the self-centeredness of the modern American psyche.

Republican politics has been of the “me first” variety, focusing on how best to enable the most ambitious and enterprising and ruthless and privileged among us to elbow their way to the front of the line. The result has been heretofore unimagined levels of prosperity for some, but also grotesque levels of [income and wealth inequality](#) .

Democratic politics has been of the “me too” kind, concentrating on getting previously excluded or disadvantaged segments of the population more rights and opportunities. As a result, historic advances have been made in such areas as civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights and disability rights. The gains have not come without a cost to Democrats as they have lost much of their appeal to blue collar Americans, especially working class white men.

Two generations worth of emphasis on individual advancement and self fulfillment have been both good and bad. Americans have grown more equal in some ways, more unequal in others. Some have prospered, others have been left behind. Many have finally secured a seat at the table, which is good. America is more divided and politically polarized than it has been in a very long time, which is not.

What “me politics” has done for us and to us is striking and significant, but equally striking is what is missing and can only be provided by a resurgence of “we politics.”

The list of missing things is long, but here are three in need of resuscitation for starters:

- **Public service.** Doing for others at personal sacrifice has fallen out of fashion. Even serving in elective office now smacks of self dealing more than at perhaps any other time in our nation’s history, evidenced by the [revolving door](#) between Congress and the lucrative lobbying trade. The same game is on prominent display in statehouses across the country. True public service is not a training program to prepare for plum jobs paying six- and seven-figure salaries.

- **Mutual support.** Being there for each other takes many forms. Neighbors helping neighbors. Communities pulling together. Service to country. This ethic is at the heart of “we politics.”

- **Common good.** Me politics is about private interests. What is yours and what is mine. We politics is about the public interest and what is ours. It cultivates an understanding that we’re all in this together and we need each other. That understanding prompts us to act in ways that enrich the commonwealth. Such action has become too rare.

For a long time now, American politics has been me politics. Change is in the air. You can feel it. But we won’t move from me to we automatically. It has to be done consciously and will take concerted effort. It’s time to ask what we can do for our country again.