

Stability • Temperance • Consistency

The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin



When I first started in the legislature, I saw a lot of marriages that were destroyed in Annapolis. Just go home at night. Pick your own priorities. If you want to go home to your family every night, you can.

—Ben Cardin

Senator Ben Cardin is a lifelong public servant of Maryland. Ben was elected to Maryland's House of Delegates at twenty-three. He served as its speaker for eight years, starting at age thirty-five. He has spent the last twenty years representing Maryland in Congress: from 1987 onward in the House, and since 2006 in the Senate

It might seem strange, at first, to refer to the senator by his first name, but regardless of who you are, a tourist in Washington, D.C., or a Senate colleague, Ben wants you to call him by his first name. He doesn't believe in titles, and he explains why:

“Our founders got it right when they didn’t want Americans to have titles or to become royalty. I know that titles—whether you’re a doctor, a manager, or a legislator—focus on demanding respect. I really do think it is inhibiting, and that you’re better off talking to people as equals. I have a rule at my office: “Call me by my first name; don’t call me Senator.” In a way, it’s because I want to be able to communicate with all as equals. I want to be able to get their talent, their information, and their expertise. If it becomes too formal, then I think something is lost in that.”

Following history and tradition is a core part of Ben’s life. Ben was born on October 5, 1943, the third generation of a Jewish-Russian immigrant family in Maryland. From an early age, his family instilled in Cardin the importance of ethics, responsibility, and public service, as his grandfather built up his own business in Baltimore and his father served in the Maryland House of Delegates and sat on the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City.

Ethics were instilled in Ben by his environment, too. Since its early days as a colony, Maryland has been a haven for religious freedom; the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 was the great forerunner to the First Amendment’s Free Exercise clause. This fact is not lost on the Cardin family—nor are the memories of times when the state did not live up to the good character established in its legislation:

“My grandparents wanted their children to grow up in a country where they were able to practice their Jewish faith and fully participate in their community and government. My father, one of their sons, became a lawyer, state legislator, circuit court judge, and president of the synagogue, and now his son serves in the United States Senate.

While our founding fathers made freedom of religion a priority, equal protection for all races took longer to achieve. I attended Liberty School No. 64, a public elementary school in Baltimore City. It was part of a segregated public school system that, under law, denied every student in Baltimore the opportunity to learn in a classroom that represented the diversity of our community.

I remember with great sadness how discrimination was not only condoned, but also more often than not, actually encouraged against blacks, Jews, Catholics, and other minorities in the community. There were neighborhoods that my parents warned me to avoid for [...] safety, because I was Jewish.

The local movie theater denied admissions to African-Americans. Community swimming pools had signs that said “No Jews, no blacks allowed.” Even Baltimore’s amusement parks and sports clubs were segregated by race.”

In 1964, Ben married Myrna Edelman and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BA in economics. Ringing in Ben’s ear, though, was John Kennedy’s iconic call to the youth of America: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.” This triggered Ben’s strong belief in the difference one person can make, the good one person can accomplish, when his or her actions are based upon a commitment to ethics and service. Three years later he received a law degree from the University of Maryland, graduating first in his class. That same year, 1967, at the age of twenty-three, Ben answered Kennedy’s call to service and was elected to the Maryland House of Delegates. Ben’s strength of character drives his desire to serve and has not waned. He describes himself today:

“I am an optimist, and I strongly believe that government can be a force for good in improving the lives of people. I also am a realist who sets priorities about what I can accomplish. I would say that honesty, a strong moral compass, and the ability to listen are very important to me. I try to be honest with myself—about what I want to accomplish and why. I also believe it’s important to listen to others, even to those with whom I may disagree.”

From a very early moment, Ben realized the enormous power he wielded as a public servant—a power suffused with responsibility:

“My first major victory in life as an elected official was getting a backstop in a high school field so that the Little League could have a place to play. I always remembered that the Northwest Little League was looking for a place to play. Northwest High School had a field, but they couldn’t play there because they didn’t have a backstop. A ball would go out of the field, and retrieving it was not safe. They were really desperate. I picked up the phone, and I called the mayor of Baltimore, and he took my call. I said I had this problem and needed a backstop to be put up. Then the new backstop appeared at Northwest.

It just showed me the power I had in the Maryland General Assem-

bly at age twenty-three. It taught me a very valuable lesson that first I had power; second, I could get things done; and third, I should use [that power] properly. Suppose there shouldn't have been a backstop there. The mayor was taking my word for it, and it was a real lesson to me. And it also told me that I could get things done, and I could make a difference in people's lives. These children would have a place to play, and it was important to them."

Ben's political philosophy is that government can be a force for good when dedicated public servants, with a strong moral compass, step forward to prioritize necessary reforms and programs to help all citizens. This requires patience and an ability to listen to those with whom you disagree. It requires a strong ethical norm that calls out and stands up for injustice wherever it is seen. These themes have defined Ben's legislative career.

Ben was an active member of many committees of the State Legislature. Well aware of his ethics and his understanding of how to wield power, his colleagues elected him the youngest Speaker of the House for Maryland in over a hundred years. The year was 1979, and Ben was thirty-five years of age. Presented with a unique opportunity to guide the state's legislative agenda, Ben worked diligently to reform the House's ethics rules. To this day, Ben still involves himself in this cause, teaching ethics at the Johns Hopkins University and working with the ethics program at the U.S. Naval Academy. Additionally, he guided key reforms of school finance and property tax, both of which improved conditions for Maryland residents.

In 1987, Ben left the House of Delegates and was elected to Congress for Maryland's Third Congressional District. Originally a Baltimore-based district, the Third Congressional District now includes portions of Anne Arundel County as well as the city of Annapolis, following the 2000 census. Nevertheless, Ben won re-election nine times, winning by margins of at least twenty points in each election.

Cardin's signature work came in expanding Medicare benefits, first to include preventative exams for diseases such as colon, prostate, and breast cancer, as well as osteoporosis. He also secured expanded prescription drug coverage for chronic diseases, and authored bills to reform and expand welfare services, the childcare tax credit, and the welfare-to-work program.

Ben also authorized legislation enacted in 2001 that expanded the amount Americans could save for retirement. *Worth Magazine* cited Cardin as among the top "One hundred people who have influenced the way Americans think about money." The publication lauded his work on fiscal



policy, as well as in other areas. He has also written legislation to help fund graduate medical education and guarantee coverage for emergency health services—and worked to hold fathers accountable for child support.

Ben continued his role as a respected leader, begun at the state-level legislature, among his colleagues in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served as Senior Democratic Whip. Ben also chaired for the minority in the Organization, Study, and Review Committee and in the Steering Committee of the Democratic Caucus. Furthering his work on bipartisan ethics reform, he chaired the Bipartisan Ethics Task Force in 1997 in order to review House ethics procedures. Additionally, in the House, he served on committees ranging from Ways and Means, and Budget, to Public Works and Transportation, Judiciary, Ethics, House Administration, and Homeland Security. He was also the senior Democrat on the Trade Subcommittee and the Human Resources Subcommittee of Ways and Means.

His signature leadership efforts, however, came following fellow Marylander, Representative Steny Hoyer, as a Commissioner of the U.S. Helsinki Commission—a committee that advocates for human rights globally. Ben has carried over his service on this committee since being elected to the Senate, and he currently chairs the Commission. His role in the Commission has allowed Ben to travel worldwide and apply his vision for public service to international issues in need of leadership and moral clarity.

In 2006, Ben won an open-seat Senate race against Republican challenger Michael Steele. Since moving across the Capitol, Ben has continued his active role in the Senate's affairs. Ben currently sits on the Committees for Environment and Public Works, the Judiciary, Foreign Relations, Budget, and Small Business and Entrepreneurship. This is in addition to his continuing work with the Helsinki Commission.

Ben has used his experience to quickly advance a strong legislative agenda. He secured a dental benefit program in the reauthorization of the Children's Health Insurance Program, as well as a first-time tax credit for homebuyers and a higher surety cap for small businesses in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Ben continues diligently working for his constituents today. He works hard to ensure that the foundations upon which our republic stands will be there for future generations.

A free press is one of many traditions that Ben considers important for securing democracy. He has recently taken up the fight to ensure that an open and vibrant press continues for many generations:

“Our country depends on an open and free press to monitor what happens in our communities so that Americans can make sound judgments about their lives and leaders. Thomas Jefferson, a man who was frequently vilified by newspapers, summed it up best when he said: “If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter.”

Like Jefferson, I believe that a well-informed public is the core of our democracy. How can we forget the role newspapers played in uncovering the Watergate and Enron scandals or the AIG bonus debacle? News stories, reported by journalists, often bring to public attention decisions and actions that affect all of us.”

Ben also believes that strong families are integral to strong nations, since most other traditions—both civic and religious—are handed on most directly through the family. So it comes as no surprise that Ben's home life is important to him. He's been married for over forty-five years, with two children. Amid all his accomplishments, putting his family first—above even work and ambition—was the right choice in life for him:

“You set your own priorities. When I first started in the legislature, I saw a lot of marriages that were destroyed in Annapolis. I was just really wor-

ried about that. Maybe it's inconsistent, family life with public life, and it really challenged me in the beginning. It was not at all inconsistent. Pick your own priorities: if you want to go drinking every night, you can; if you want to go home to your family every night, you can. And the person who goes drinking every night doesn't get any more bills passed than the person who goes home at night. That's true. I got more bills passed than a lot of the drinkers. I became speaker; they didn't. And I went home every night to my family. I felt that was the right thing to do, and I wanted to do that."

Ben's strong family has known both joys and sorrows. Living life in the public eye can make a family tragedy even harder to bear, but that was not the case for the Cardins. In 1998, when Ben and Myrna tragically lost their thirty-year-old-son, Michael, family friend and fellow-Congressman Steny Hoyer offered comfort from the floor of the Congress. Despite all the pain Ben and Myrna were facing, it speaks volumes about them that they permitted these words to be placed in the Congressional Record:

"There were two characteristics, Mr. Speaker, which I remember most about Michael. He cared more for others than for himself, and he was an intelligent young man whose greatest concern was for those less fortunate...

In 1993, Michael graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law. With his grandfather in attendance, Michael received his Juris Doctorate degree after hearing his father deliver the commencement address...This past winter, Michael was admitted to the Maryland bar; a bright future lay ahead. After passing the bar, he worked in Baltimore for the special counsel and volunteered at the Hamden Family Center, working with children and families.

At the service this past Sunday, his father rose and said that there were many instances of which he and Myrna had no knowledge, incidents that demonstrated with individual people, homeless, children, people in trouble, Michael repeatedly showed the character that he had, which I suspect was in his genes, because it was consistent with the Cardin contribution...I do not know any family that I have ever met, Mr. Speaker, that is more supportive, closer, more giving, more respectful of one another than the family headed by Ben and Myrna Cardin. They are wonderful human beings, good and decent people who loved and nurtured their son without reservation. Michael, for the thirty years that he had, got the best that there was in the Cardin family."

Steny and Ben have enjoyed a close professional and personal relationship throughout their careers. In many respects, Steny has been a mentor for Ben as a Congressman, and as Chair of the Helsinki Commission, Steny has enabled Ben to continue making a difference globally, regardless of reward. As Ben says:

“A lot of things I’ve done—and this is really following another person I admire greatly, Steny Hoyer—Steny Hoyer used the power of the Chairman of the Helsinki Commission to really help human rights around the world [. . .]He did it because it was the right thing to do. . . .I try to follow his example (as current Chairman) and really try to make a difference for a lot of minority communities. I know people back home don’t know what I’m doing there, but it really is helping others. I have a selfless role model to follow in Steny Hoyer.”

Throughout his career, Ben has achieved numerous honors and distinctions in his pursuit of selfless service. As a legislator, he has received a grade of “A” from the NAACP, a score of 100 from the Human Rights Campaign, and a 100 percent rating from the League of Conservation Voters. He holds honorary degrees from the University of Baltimore School of Law, the University of Maryland at Baltimore, the Baltimore Hebrew University, Goucher College, and Villa Julie College. He has sat on numerous boards and received honors from a myriad of civic organizations.

As Ben continues his public service, he remains animated by the same melding of optimism and realism with which he began his career. Ben’s work remains grounded in his belief that there is more that unites people than divides them, and that the same basic morals and principles should guide all people. A proper public good includes the ability to live free of oppression, to earn a decent living, and to raise children in safety and security. Every person, whether legislator or citizen, can impact society. This is the legacy Ben Cardin hopes to leave.