

# Politically Correct

**Keynote speaker Charlie Cook will address upcoming elections and the polarized political environment.**

By Laura Williams-Tracy

Charlie Cook measures time by presidential elections, and he's been a faithful self storage customer since George W. Bush faced John Kerry. That's 2004 for you and me.

A political analyst for the *National Journal* and NBC, author of *The Cook Political Report*, and a highly sought-after public speaker, Cook will headline the Self Storage Association's Fall Conference & Trade Show at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, September 9–12.

Cook will share insights on the stakes of the mid-term elections and give his perspective on the 2016 presidential race—all with his quick wit, memorable stories and encyclopedic fact retrieval.

Unlike many political analysts who got their start as journalists, Cook came to write a political column after working in politics. As a high school senior in Louisiana in 1972, he caught the political bug working for J. Bennett Johnston Jr.'s first U.S. Senate campaign. He headed to Washington, D.C., for college and quickly became immersed in the beltway's inner workings. He worked for the Democratic Policy Committee and the National Association of Home Builders. A self-described moderate and independent, Cook realized that writing the newsletter was a way to work in politics without working for either party.

Cook spoke recently with *SSA Globe* magazine about his career, the upcoming elections, and how politics can remain relevant to the self storage industry.

**SSA Globe: When you began *The Cook Political Report* in 1984, cable news was in its infancy. How have things changed?**

**Charlie Cook:** I started in the pre-Internet era when the publication was on paper and stapled on the corner. American politics is very different than it was in the '80s. This dysfunction that we see in Washington is almost unrecognizable from what we saw back then.

**SSA Globe: Tell us about the early days of the business. Did you struggle?**

**Cook:** In the early years the mail would come around lunch time. My wife was working outside the home then, and I'd call to tell her I'd gotten maybe two new subscriptions to the newsletter in the mail. If she didn't hear from me she knew we didn't get any new subscriptions. I could always

tell when she worried, because she'd start buying chicken and pork chops and

freezing them for winter. But we hung in there from 1984 until things started turning the corner in 1991 and 1992. The first Persian Gulf War, the recession, and George H.W. Bush being vulnerable and the fascinating Clinton-Perot election meant more interest in my work. I came along as CSPAN and CNN were starting, so the appetite for people to talk about politics increased a lot in a short time and it provided an opportunity for young guys to break through.

**SSA Globe: Is it hard to remain independent and non-partisan as the country has become highly polarized?**

**Cook:** People hear so much from the right and the left that it creates an opening for someone trying to be down the middle. I was a moderate and became an independent. The natural tendency for those on either party's side is to overlook the shortcomings of those on their side and blow out the mistakes of those on the other side. They become incapable of handicapping, because they care so much.

**SSA Globe: Where do you think the extreme polarization is taking us as a country?**

**Cook:** We've got one group that loves FOX News and another that loves to watch MSNBC. The moderates and swing voters have lives and they aren't watching either. They are watching *American Idol* or *Big Bang Theory*. The people in the middle are not obsessed with politics, and for the most part those are the people who decide general elections.

**SSA Globe: What's at stake in the mid-term elections?**

**Cook:** Democrats have a lot of seats at risk this year, so the thumb is on the scale for Republicans this year. In mid-term elections, the voter turnout is smaller, older and whiter. In presidential years, the electorate is broad. In 2016, the Republicans have a disproportionate number of seats in states Obama carried and that being a presidential year will benefit Democrats then. We don't know that the Senate will flip Republican this year and flip back to Democrats in 2016, but the Senate is likely to be closely divided for the foreseeable future.

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Tim Ryman, Owner

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**SSA Globe: What happens in 2016?**

**Cook:** In all probability Hillary runs and wins the nomination, though I think there is a 30- to 40-percent chance she decides not to. People in their late 60s don't take on nine-year commitments lightly. At the same time, she's one of the most ambitious people on the planet. If not her, the Democrats might nominate Joe Biden, who's four years older, Kirsten Gillibrand, Elizabeth Warren or Andrew Cuomo. If Hillary runs, it's not a gimme; and Democrats aren't toast if she doesn't.

Republicans will have to see how they've dealt with the problems they've had with minorities, women and young voters. What's the value of their nomination and the value of the Republican brand? To me it's ideal to nominate a candidate between the 40-yard lines to hold the base and get swing voters. Chris Christie is on the 40- or 45-yard line, Jeb Bush is on the 35-yard line and the rest are in the teens, ideologically. I'm not sure the Republican Party we have today is inclined to nominate someone between the 30- and 50-yard lines. Look at who they gave us last time—Bachman, Cain, Santorum, Perry, Gingrich. I'd put Romney on the 25-yard line.

**SSA Globe: Many people are disgusted with Washington. What are they missing out on as business people if they tune out what's happening in national politics?**

**Cook:** Those people are more likely to drop off in mid-term elections than to not vote in presidential elections. At least in presidential elections, there is a sense of civic obligation that you are supposed to vote.

**SSA Globe: What keeps politics exciting for you?**

**Cook:** I still find politics very interesting, but I think I have more of a life now. It's different watching Washington now and having seen it earlier. I first worked on Capitol Hill during the second semester of my freshman year of college. I've watched a long time. A lot of changes have not been changes for the better. Usually when the pendulum goes too far one way, something happens to bring it back. I sure hope that happens sooner than later. ♦



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