TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — A leader like [*Bob Graham*](https://apnews.com/hub/bob-graham) would be a unicorn in the hyper-partisan ***politics*** of today.

The former Florida governor and U.S. senator wasn't a slick, slogan-spouting politician. He didn't have an us-against-them mentality. Sometimes, he even came across as more of a kind-hearted professor just trying to make the world a better place.

He connected with people on a very real level during his nearly five decades in ***politics***, and he had immense respect for the nation's political process and institutions. [*Graham died Tuesday at the age of 87.*](https://apnews.com/article/bob-graham-dies-obituary-florida-senator-governor-80c4f1609e314eff981fcfae7d0b32ba)

In a state long politically divided and now dominated by Republicans, he earned support among Republicans and Democrats alike with a folksy charm that belied the fact that he was a millionaire Harvard-educated lawyer. He fit in just as easily in conservative, rural north Florida as he did in bustling Miami.

Graham was known for his workdays, when he would try a new job for a day. They began when he was a state senator and became a regular feature in his campaigns and time in office. It was his way to meet and connect with every day folks. His 408th and final workday was wrapping Christmas presents for a Florida Keys charity.

“I’ve been Santa Claus, I’ve been an elf and, on a number of occasions as today, I’ve been a Santa Claus helper,” Graham said that day, wearing a red shirt instead of a red suit.

The workdays were similar to the 1,003-mile walk that former U.S. Sen. and Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles used to launch his foray into national ***politics***.

“I don’t know why there hasn’t been other efforts, either to emulate a walk or workdays or some other way to establish a special relationship with the people,” Graham said.

After he retired from ***politics***, Graham made it his goal to encourage people — all people — to get involved in civic affairs, from the local level on up. He established the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida, which list its mission as “three central principles: civic engagement, public leadership and public service.”

In his book “America: The Owners Manual,” Graham wrote, “Since my retirement from the U.S. Senate in 2005, I have become increasingly involved in the effort to transform civics from a spectator sport into a participatory sport — one in which citizens directly engage in democracy and shape local, state and federal policies to the betterment of their families and communities.”

President Joe Biden, who served in the Senate with Graham, described him as a person of principle.

“Bob loved people, and he knew that ***politics*** at its core is about learning from and serving others. That’s why he spent more than 400 ‘workdays’ on the job with constituents, doing everything from picking tomatoes, to handling baggage, to patrolling the streets with police. He knew it matters to walk a mile in other folks’ shoes,” Biden said in a statement.

Graham briefly ran for president in 2004, emphasizing his opposition to the invasion of Iraq. When Al Gore lost Florida, and thus the presidency, by 537-votes to George W. Bush in 2000, many speculated that Gore would have won if he had picked Graham instead of Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman as his running mate.

Democrats and Republicans remember him fondly.

“Florida and our country has lost a great public servant. Bob Graham served Floridians with a servants heart, with integrity and with civility. Columba and I are praying for the Graham family,” former Republican Gov. Jeb Bush said in an email.

Charlie Crist, who served as a Republican governor before switching parties and serving as Democratic U.S. representative, said Graham was an influence on him.

“I always felt that when he was governor, that he was trying to govern for the people of Florida — not in any way political or partisan — and I took that to heart and tried to, in some small way, emulate it,” Crist said in a phone interview.

Graham's daughter, former U.S. Rep. Gwen Graham, tried following in her father's footsteps, running for [*governor in 2018 in much the same spirit he did*](https://apnews.com/gubernatorial-elections-political-news-general-news-4afdb9e0e16945cba1e1a2bb16fdeeb9), continuing his workdays and promising to put people over ***politics***. She narrowly lost the Democratic primary and Republican Ron DeSantis went on to win the general election.

“I’ve certainly learned from him, but I would never expect anyone to support me simply because I am Dad’s daughter,” Graham told The Associated Press before announcing her candidacy. ”I will be a governor that does focus on what he focused on, which is making the right decisions for Florida again.”

At her announcement, Bob Graham was present, and spoke of how he relished the job. “In a life of public service, I don’t think there is a more exciting but demanding job than being governor,” he said.

Chris Hand, a former speechwriter for Graham who co-wrote “America: The Owners Manual" with him, said his love of people was genuine, whether it was during workdays or meeting well-wishers after his retirement.

“He was never anything but sincerely interested in the stories they would share and he would usually conclude by getting their contact information so he could stay in touch,” Hand said. “I think that’s one of his defining features as a leader. He truly loved the people that he represented, saw them as the best source of his ideas and truly enjoyed hearing their stories and learning from them.”