Many successful businessmen and businesswomen in America run for public office thinking their business background is good preparation for a leadership position in government. This is especially true if they managed a company and guided it from humble beginnings to a multimillion-dollar organization.

But perhaps there is a better preparation for government leadership -- namely, being a successful pastor of a church.

Put simply, a business aims to balance the conflicting interests of four groups: investors, managers, employees and customers. The investors paid to set up the company and want to make a profit on that investment by selling to the customers the goods or services produced by the employees. Investors want to sell the product at a price that ensures a profit, but not so high the customers won't buy it.

The employees constitute much of the cost. A company needs employees to produce the product or service and so must pay them. Of course, employees want high wages, while investors desire the opposite.

In a successful company, managers balance the competing goals of the other three groups: the customers who want to minimize the purchase price, the employees who want to maximize wages, and the owners who want to maximize profits from the price by minimizing wages and other costs.

In most churches, by contrast, the investors and customers comprise the same group of people: the congregation. Furthermore, apart from the minister herself or himself, most of the "employees" are actually volunteers from the congregation: Sunday school teachers, choir members, ushers and so on. (Of course there are a few other employees: the secretary, janitor, organist and choir director.) "Management" also is volunteer: apart from the pastor, most management tasks are undertaken by committees of congregants.

So rather than the separate, competing groups underpinning a business, a church consists of one group of people who move among roles comparable to a company's four constituencies. Management in a church is not about balancing competition between groups, but about balancing the different interests coming from the same group.

A church needs to maximize products and services to the parishioners as customers -- whether matters of worship, education, social interaction, comforting and counseling, or spiritual uplift and salvation. At the same time, the church's management tries keep down the costs so that the parishioners as investors do not complain about them.

Of course, a church's goal is not monetary profit, but lies in the intangible benefits which the congregation receives. In other words, the products and services themselves comprise the "profit."

A church's management challenge is to provide what the congregation as customers want, for the cost that the congregation as investors are willing to pay through their tithes and donations. If the management fails in this balance, they can be removed.

So, which position is better training for government leadership in a democracy -- management of a company or a church? The management of the organization a government is most like, namely, a church.

In a democracy like the United States, the customers and the investors are essentially the same people -- namely, the citizens. The government provides goods and services for the citizens while the citizens as investors pay for them through their taxes. As investors, the citizens also vote to hire and fire the management from among themselves who, in turn, are responsible for hiring and firing employees from among the citizens.

Why does a church provide training for democratic leadership? Because the similarity in organization gives ministers experience in the same human dynamics the government encounters.

In a business, management can play off the interests of customers against those of investors against those of employees. And if managers fail, only the investors can fire them.

In a democratic government and a church, the customers and the investors are the same, and the managers and the employees are just a subset of them. On the one hand, if the customers-investors are unhappy about either products or cost, they can fire management.

On the other hand, significant changes in management and employees impacts the welfare of the customers-investors. A reduction in investment (taxes) means a reduction in the number of employees who can function as citizen investors. That, in turn, forces reductions in goods and services to the citizen consumers who need them, which makes them unhappy and desirous of voting out management.

In the end, good democratic management skills are not those that pit different groups against each other, but those which understand that there is only one group of people who exhibit those differing interests.

(The ideas in this column were inspired by Paul Krugman's Jan. 12 column in the New York Times, "America Isn't a Corporation.")