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Are All Politicians Liars? I Don't Know



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After over a year in electoral politics, twice a candidate, I get asked a lot of left field questions about my policies or stances. Running for New York City Council, I got asked all the time how I was going to stop Donald Trump. Running for New York State Committee, a much smaller unpaid position, I get asked what I can do to make the trains run on time.

While I aim to make the world a better place, I started responding to these questions with soft fibs or white lies. I would say things like “Of course my only goal is to get in the way of that agenda” or “If we build a stronger platform, we can fund infrastructure”.

It’s not that I didn’t believe those things in some form, but those weren’t the goals. It takes a lot of work to explain to people that while Democrats control New York City and the state as a whole, it’s not like there aren’t conservatives out there. They just aren’t running as Republicans because they don’t want to start off at a disadvantage.

When our politics belie unexamined existential questions, are we lying? If the context of a politician’s participation in democracy leads them to align with a party they wouldn’t if they were in another state, are they lying? If we don’t disclose all of the boring context of a given decision, is that a lie?

Fundraising and Finance

The savviest of all politicians or aspiring candidates know how important it is to raise funds. It’s so important that they begin raising funds long in advance of their run for political office. Due to the complexities of campaign finance laws, candidates will often end up in warm if not simmering water over small mistakes. However, we shouldn’t take violations lightly.

In New York City, candidates can receive public funding by going out and getting x-number of donations at y-dollar amount from people in their district during a set period of time. The aim is to support small-dollar donations. If you’re an expert fundraiser, it’s an easy bar to hit. If you’re not, it’s hard to meet the deadline without taking shortcuts.

I’ve spoken with people who I know are running for office in a few years. They’ve openly suggested I start fundraising now. Even though the six-month period for collection hasn’t started yet, they have tactics for making it work.

They gather the funds, post date checks and put future dates on donation forms, only to deposit it all at a later date. This way they get years to collect that money to qualify for public funding rather than a few months to scramble it all together. Is this deceitful? Perhaps. Illegal? Not quite.

Other candidates will find ways to gather money from corporations and real estate developers via LLC loopholes or bundled donations which are later dispersed between several individuals all at the maximum dollar amount possible. We’re hearing conversations about this locally or nationally but there are so many loopholes that this is more or less legal.

The point is that despite moves to make the process more open, transparent, and progressive, we've still got some serious blind spots.

Street Talking

When out on the street, trying to engage with voters, there are a few different speeds that a candidate or elected officials need to work on. When meeting someone for the first time and trying to win their vote, many candidates have the impulse to shut their mouth and wait to hear the voter's opinion. From there, the aspiring official can pivot their position around the voter. Most people are dying to share their opinion so this whole sleight of hand can be done effortlessly, without anyone catching on.

Is this lying? I don't know.

The one way you can know whether or not an elected official is prepared to do this is by their literature. If they're standing out there with a card or pamphlet that says they want to end corruption, that's much different than saying they want to pass "resolution 346" to block corporate donations to political campaigns. This might seem obvious, but it's a tactic that can get lost during the charming dance of meeting a candidate for the first time. Some candidates codeswitch while out on the campaign trail. The clearest and perhaps most entertaining instance of this was when then-President Obama greeted a line of white well-wishers with a standard handshake and leaned in to give dap to a Kevin Durant in the same row of people.

This has some pretty clunky examples too, like when Bernie tried to speak Spanish in an ad, late in his presidential campaign. Codeswitching isn't like lying but it certainly reveals the layers that make up a candidate's identity or in some cases, who we think we're supposed to be.

Evolution and Flashback

Some candidates find that their positions evolve over time. It's important and common for people to evolve from idealistic positions to something a little more "pragmatic" or "practical". However, it's just as feasible, if less common, to go in the opposite direction, against opportunistic positions, to take ones that are more informed by rising tides of public opinion.

While someone might once argue that we need to reform criminal justice to allow for non-violent offenders, they might find they need to take a harsher tone than they once did. Others realize the inherent racism in the criminal justice system and realize that perhaps the carceral system is too flawed to perform any meaningful reforms on.

While many potential candidates for president in 2020 are only quietly making moves, Elizabeth Warren is one who is laying the groundwork for reforming Wall Street. As she sees the tide of Democratic Socialism swelling up in the horizon, she's managing all sides of the argument with her latest bill, the Accountable Capitalism Act.

In this act, she's pushing for reforming capitalism, avoiding being called a socialist by never dismantling of capitalism as we know it but which could have the effect of keeping Wall Street grounded. When people say socialism without saying socialism or when people are hogtying unbounded capitalism without calling it anything but "accountability", are they lying?

It may not matter too much. At the end of the day, we all want to get income inequality under control. Even if Warren's position is somewhat opportunistic, it's nothing more than a slight adjustment on what she has been aiming at for years. When employees elect nearly half of the directors of a corporation, as this bill demands, that's not a seizure of the means of production, but it's certainly a hand on the wheel.

The question now is what will she say when they call her a socialist, despite saying that she is "a capitalist to her bones?" Will she, like Cynthia Nixon, capitulate to the attitude of "we might as well give them the real thing?" Or will she back down and give value to the cheap scare tactics, rejecting the call for millions of voters to abandon capitalism as we know it.

Are We All Liars?

When I'm out on the street campaigning, petitioning for people to get on the ballot, or registering people to vote, lots of people brag about their lack of affiliation with the party system. They find parties and their membership to be untrustworthy, shady, and reliant on exclusivity. They're not wrong.

In New York alone, our governor, our mayor, and a healthy proportion of our elected officials are facing suits regarding their fundraising tactics. While they use lots of deceitful methods, they aren't always illegal. But should that be the yardstick that we should judge elected officials by?

As individuals, we are guided by conscience when we jump out of our seats to let a pregnant person sit down or when we shout "look out!" as a stranger steps into fast moving traffic. It's not illegal to do nothing. It's legal to be a bystander.

But it is our duty to demand more from candidates. We should regard the deceitful as more, not less, problematic when it is legal. Being an opportunist is a race to the bottom and one that no one can win.

