

The Character Issue

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We have been hearing a great deal lately about “the character issue,” a reference to whether a candidate’s moral character should matter to voters. This discussion of the character of public officials is not of recent origin. In fact, a number of history’s most talented writers have wrestled with the issues of what constitutes character, and of character’s place in the political process. Their thoughts can help bring some clarity to this rather muddy debate.

What is meant by the term “character”? The Greek philosopher Aristotle, writing in his book, “Rhetoric,” affirmed that audiences look for three character qualities in a public speaker. These three qualities are good sense (phronesis), virtue (arete), and good will (eunoia). In other words, audiences ask themselves three questions about a political candidate: 1. Can this person be relied upon to make good practical judgments on important issues? 2. Does this speaker possess basic and widely acknowledged virtues such as honesty and courage? 3. Does this political care about my welfare, or is he or she only out to advance his or her own interests?

Aristotle called character by the Greek name *ethos*, and said that of the three persuasive means available to a political speaker (the other two being arguments and emotional appeals), character was the single most powerful one. I might add that it was the opinion of the ancient Greeks that good character could not be faked, whereas evidence could be. Thus, audiences will trust character over evidence.

A few centuries after Aristotle, the Roman writer Cicero also found character to be central to the persuasive appeal of political speakers. In Cicero’s opinion, an individual’s character remained relatively constant throughout a lifetime. Thus, an act of early adulthood that revealed a virtue such as courage or a vice such as cowardice was still relevant to decisions about that person’s character years later.

To the Roman way of thinking, no single quality of a politician was more important for the public to ascertain than was that of character. Expertise and intelligence were useless or even dangerous in the absence of good character.

A later Roman teacher of oratory, Quintilian, would not even work with a student he deemed to be lacking in good character. His definition of character was tied closely to an individual’s adherence to traditional Roman values, to those qualities that were held to typify a good Roman—loyalty, courage, patriotism.

During the Renaissance, character remained a central theme on discussions of public speaking, of politics, and of politicians. At this time, character was thought to be present when a speaker united two qualities: 1. Wisdom, or a grasp of a wide range of subjects, and 2. Eloquence, or the ability to speak forcefully and beautifully. Both a politician’s knowledge, and the words in

which that knowledge was expressed, were carefully scrutinized by audiences making judgments about character. Knowledge without eloquence would never sway an audience to follow a leader, while eloquence without knowledge was just empty ornamentation.

Virtually all historical discussions of political speaking, character is not merely an issue, it is the central issue. Audiences always have scrutinized a speaker's character, finding character to be the best guide to a politician's fitness to lead.

The public is drawn to a political figure more certainly by a perception of strong character than by any other trait or quality. We are concerned to find out whether a political speaker upholds the central values that define our nation. Voters also ask if a speaker seems sensible, honest, and caring. We judge a speaker's breadth of knowledge and his or her ability to express that knowledge clearly and forcefully.

These, historically, are the components of character that citizens look for in their political leaders. Does character matter? It always has, and it always will.

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