



## **The Importance of Integrity**

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The presidential campaign is a long and severe test of the candidates' integrity. This month Barack Obama's integrity was challenged because of his relationship to reverend Wright; John McCain's because of his relationship to pastor Hagee, and McCain and Hillary Clinton have both been accused of pandering by proposing a summer gas-tax holiday.

This is a hard and ugly process that frequently goes too far. But focusing on a candidate's integrity makes a lot of sense. Integrity is perhaps the most important characteristic of great political leaders, like Abraham Lincoln. But when a leader lacks it everyone can suffer. For example, Richard Nixon lacked integrity and his presidency was a tragic personal failure and a disaster for the nation. However, integrity doesn't refer to a clearly definable characteristic: it's multifaceted. It refers to hard-to-pin-down things like keeping oneself whole, being free of corruption, being consistent and resolute. It involves the capacity to overcome temptations that might diminish oneself.

Integrity is an important notion, but not a clear one. What is this quality that we look for in great leaders? Scholars have written quite a bit about integrity in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, the result of this scholarship is a complex and sometimes conflicting picture. However, there are at least three aspects of the current discussion on integrity that are helpful in thinking about this attribute. These are: integrity as standing for something, as having a moral purpose, and as a virtue.

One aspect of integrity is to stand for something. If a person is running for an influential decision-making position, they need to believe that their judgments on important issues matter, that they stand behind them. According to one thinker, people who conceal their views, change them under pressure, alter them to get something, or pander to views they judge to be bad, betray their own judgments.<sup>2</sup> Those with integrity are still open to listening to others and are capable of changing their views. In contrast, fanatics may stand for something, but they lack integrity because they refuse to listen to others, will not accept challenges, and refuse to change their minds, no matter what. People of integrity believe that their contributions to deliberations about the way to live, and what should be done, count. They are confident in their views, and because of their confidence they don't mind criticisms and having their views challenged.

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<sup>1</sup> Damian Cox, et. al., "Integrity," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, "Standing for Something," *Journal of Philosophy*, XCII, 235-260.

Integrity is more than standing by one's judgments. A person of integrity has a moral purpose.<sup>3</sup> Having a moral core is central to the notion of integrity. This doesn't mean we have to agree with a politician's moral stances to say they have integrity. But we must be able to understand how a reasonable person of goodwill can be committed to these views.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the moral commitment of a person with integrity must be clear, make sense and withstand criticism.<sup>5</sup> This means that for a person to maintain their integrity they must avoid decisions that are merely expedient and behaviors that are artificial. A person of integrity avoids shallowness of any kind.<sup>6</sup> As Benjamin Franklin remarked, "It's hard to have an empty bag stand upright."

It would be unrealistic to demand perfection of candidates as the qualification for integrity. That's why looking at integrity as a virtue is important. Virtues don't require perfection or immunity from temptation. However, the person with the virtue of integrity consistently avoids the hazard that would damage their integrity. One set of hazards are things like arrogance, dogmatism, fanaticism and rigidity. These things can undermine a person's integrity because they don't allow a person to critically assess their goals and desires.<sup>7</sup> A person without some flexibility in their view lacks integrity, like a skyscraper that is too rigid lacks structural integrity, because it doesn't have the flexibility to withstand earthquakes and high winds. The other set of hazards are things like triviality, capriciousness, hypocrisy, self deception, and indifference. These things can undermine a person's integrity because they prevent a person from developing a stable character. A person without solidity of character lacks integrity, like a house with a fragile foundation lacks structural integrity. Integrity as a virtue means consistently avoiding these two sets of hazards. Integrity is not being perfect, but something people strive for with greater and lesser degrees of success.<sup>8</sup>

It's no doubt difficult to maintain one's integrity while pursuing positions of power. The path to the White House runs the gauntlet of temptations from special interest groups to corporations seeking to buy influence. Potentially great leaders can pass these tests because they stand for something, have a moral purpose, and possess the virtue of integrity. The presidential campaign is a severe test of the candidates' integrity. It is important that they pass this test; we need to have confidence in our leaders and it's impossible to have confidence without integrity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cox.

<sup>4</sup> Lynne McFall, "Integrity," *Ethics* 98, 5-20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cox, et al.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Johnson