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Post 20. G. James Lemoine: Why are so many political leaders unethical and what can we do about it?



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Introduction: Republicans wonder how New Yorkers could have ever supported disgraced New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, amazed that his polling among state voters remained so high throughout almost the entirety of the scandals of 2020-21. Meanwhile, Democrats are flabbergasted at the strong levels of support former President Donald Trump continues to receive from conservative voters, despite his numerous moral miscues. The rise and fall of these politicians (as well as that of countless others) offers fascinating evidence on the ethics of our elected officials, and other things that don't exist.

Why are so many political leaders unethical and what can we do about it?

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“To summarize: it is a well-known fact that those people who most want to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.

To summarize the summary: anyone who is capable of getting themselves made President should on no account be allowed to do the job.”

- Douglas Adams

Republicans wonder how New Yorkers could have ever supported disgraced New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, amazed that his polling among state voters remained so high throughout almost the entirety of the scandals of 2020-21. Meanwhile, Democrats are flabbergasted at the strong levels of support former President Donald Trump continues to receive from conservative voters, despite his numerous moral miscues. The rise and fall of these politicians (as well as that of countless others) offers fascinating evidence on the ethics of our elected officials, and other things that don't exist.

Why do we keep electing and re-electing devious, narcissistic, tyrannical and immoral men and women to positions of power? Scholars much wiser than I have spent careers and lifetimes digging into this question, and it is impossible to offer a complete answer in a short blog such as this. One of the most common explanations, though, is as compelling as it is depressing: Our partisan loyalties override our moral judgments.

Start with the question of what we want from our elected officials: We'd hope that most of us would respond that they expect politicians to work for the good of their constituents and their region. Obviously, people on different sides of the political aisle vary on what they see as that “good” that elected officials should work towards. Research indicates that Democrats believe the common good is best represented by caring for and taking care of people, with emphasis on those who have historically been ignored or oppressed, whereas Republicans tend to equally value caring for others alongside matters of liberty, loyalty and personal responsibility.

How much immoral behavior are constituents willing to tolerate, then, to accomplish these aims? Widely regarded as one of our most effective presidents, Abraham Lincoln took several actions of questionable legality at the beginning of his term, such as suspending the writ of habeas corpus, in his attempts to hold the Union together. Franklin Roosevelt is widely recognized by modern Democrats as one of their greatest and most effective presidents for his roles in the New Deal and World War II, despite his interment of thousands of Asian Americans and his moral failures to act against the Nazi Holocaust. Similarly, in their honoring of Ronald Reagan, Republicans tend to gloss over his numerous ethical scandals (the most of any president to date), allegedly including illegal arms sales, rigged contracts, and bribes.

Members of one party are likely to attack the moral flaws of the other, but they somehow always manage to find excuses for members of their own party: “He’s not immoral, he’s just working the system.” “She didn’t mean that the way it sounded, she was just taken out of context.” Or, more recently, “I don’t even need to see the evidence; it’s just a partisan hit-job, not even worth replying to.” Partisans give their own candidates a pass, which gets Bad People through

primaries and into the general elections, where the public is confronted with the choice of two highly flawed candidates.

This process is illustrated by Americans' reactions to the troubling sexual assault accusations levied against U.S. Supreme Court nominee (now Justice) Brett Kavanaugh in 2018. In a poll following the release of the allegations, 76% of Democrats said they believed he was guilty, whereas 76% of Republicans were convinced on his innocence. These numbers are virtually identical to the level of support for Kavanaugh's nomination in the two parties *before the accusations came out*. This represents either a startling statistical coincidence, or it suggests that members of both parties judged Kavanaugh not on the basis of the evidence around the allegations, but on whether they personally hoped to see him as a Supreme Court justice.

It could be argued that the biggest contributor to this problem is the endemic mental laziness in humankind (no offense intended to you, dear reader — it's a natural flaw we all share). According to psychologists and neuroscientists, we are all “cognitive misers.” Our brains are confronted with so many stimuli that we *could* think about during the day, so to avoid becoming overwhelmed we subconsciously choose to think deeply about only a limited number of things. For instance, right now I could deeply cogitate regarding what to say the next time someone walks into my office, or whether I'm sitting in the most efficient and ergonomic posture, or how the mechanisms within my computer keyboard actually work. Instead, to spare cognitive energy, I just go with intuitive answers to these questions or don't worry about them, while I continue to type this paragraph. We do this all day long, every day. The good news is that it keeps us sane and makes progress possible. The bad news is that, often, it causes us to underthink the things we really should be more deeply considering.

One of those things we should really think more about is a psychological process called “splitting.” Splitting means that because our minds dislike having to process contradictions, we tend to perceive things in all-or-nothing terms — most frequently, seeing things as 100% good vs. 100% evil. It's simpler for us to think of things this way: my child can do no wrong and my grandmother is a saint, but the big tobacco executive and the guy who cut me off in traffic have no redeeming qualities.

Therefore, if evidence emerges that a politician from our own party has poor moral character (or that a position of our party is actually the wrong one), this would (and *should*) cause uncomfortable cognitive dissonance and spur us to reconsider our views and allegiances. But this would involve difficult cognition and consideration, and raise the possibility that we are wrong, none of which our subconscious is comfortable with. It's much easier and simpler to consciously or subconsciously convince ourselves that we were right all along, our favored candidate or position is 100% correct, and therefore any evidence against them must be flawed.

So, short of altering our electoral system (which isn't necessarily a bad idea), the only way to improve the moral character of our kakistocratic elected officials is to subvert our own human nature by looking at moral issues as they are, rather than as we want them to be. I'm willing to try it if you are.