

# Should we care about the morals of politicians?

By Ishaani Agarwal

“You should make me your campaign manager. I was born for politics. I have great hair and I love lying” – Gina Linetti in Brooklyn Nine-Nine (“Full Boyle”, 2014, 7:07) could not have been further from the unfortunate truth about contemporary political narratives.

Morality in politics and voter engagement in contemporary times is at an unprecedented low and while this can be attributed to various factors, the most important one is the deep sense of disillusionment and disconnect that voters feel (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2016). The mudslinging battles between potential political rivals and negative campaigns run by parties are indicators of a slow and steady degradation of morals. In the United Kingdom itself, membership to both the main political parties has reduced from 83% in the 1950s to 67% in 2019 (Ringham, 2009). Modern day politics and politicians are at an awkward intersection of being expected to be honest and trustworthy and simultaneously living with the general perception of being “ethically dubious” (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020). In this conflicting and contrasting relationship that is leading to a simmering global discontentment, it is imperative to introspect whether we should care about the morals of politicians (Debnath & Chatterjee, 2021).

I strongly agree with the importance of caring about the moral integrity of our politicians which I believe is foundational to the functioning of inclusive and positive democratic systems. Elected individuals impact and influence every aspect of our life from economics and foreign policy to social welfare and safety. They wield influence beyond geographical boundaries and their ethical leadership impacts the global good.

From an academic perspective, ‘morality can be defined as a system of beliefs or a set of values relating to right conduct, against which behaviour is judged to be acceptable or unacceptable’ (Hull et al., 2024). The clash between principles and political pragmatism has always been debatable and it is widely seen that the ethics that influence politics are divergent from the morals of regular people (Coutu, 2014). Aristotle and Plato were the precursors of political theory and why ethical principles should be integral to governance. Plato emphasised the development of moral character for rulers and citizens for a just society and Aristotle underscored the relevance of individual integrity and political vision (Nicolaidis & Tornam Duho, 2019). He believed that virtuous leaders should embody kindness, generosity, courage, benevolence, fairness, tolerance, self-discipline, and loyalty.

However, morality is rarely black and white. Each person has a conscience, and this defines their personal moral compass of right and wrong (Walzer, 1997). In politics, this is generally based on the theory of consequentialism that stems from justice and impartiality and focuses on the outcomes of actions. Deontology emphasises the importance of good actions and intentions while sociology reiterates the shared morals that regulate individuals to ensure social cohesion. All these frameworks point towards a set of innate values that should be stable and generalised. And yet, political theorists like Rynard and Shugarman (2000), criticise consequentialists for saying that if the action is justified then the politician is not guilty of any action and deontologists are firm that if something is wrong, then politicians should not commit that act. But what we see is how most politicians follow Machiavelli and claim that “when the end is good, it will always excuse the means!”

Whether morality is one’s nature or it is acquired explores another dimension in Jonathon Haidt’s ‘The Righteous Mind’ where he controversially states that people behave well only because they are afraid of getting caught and that “morality binds and blinds” (Thornton,

2024). Some political realists like Acheson (1965: 228); Korab-Karpowicz (2010) argue that ethics have no place in politics and politicians and nations cannot be bound by rules if they must be effective. So, does it justify a “good” politician merely because his policies are effective, and should that be reason enough to overlook the ethics of a candidate in an election? In my opinion, if we do that then we are reducing the job of politicians to mechanical outcomes without any human connect or any obligations to be persons of integrity.

In the political arena, history bears testament to virtue being an essential criterion for holding office (Hull et al., 2024). There is also a tendency to equate morals with marital fidelity (Hull et al., 2024). Many feel that a stable marriage indicates reliability and if a politician cannot uphold the vows he made in his personal space, it is unlikely that he can keep the oath of allegiance to the constitution. By this yardstick, leaders like Clinton and many more would fall short. What Clinton did behind closed doors should ideally have been the problem of the couple (Ringham, 2009). However, this is where the morality compass measures kick in and it does become a national issue because who and where the transgression occurred was wrong. I am not saying that politicians should be subjected to an invasion of their privacy, however, they live on a lot of tax money, their decisions affect millions of people, and hence it is necessary to hold them accountable (Pentecost, 2023). It is widely accepted that 9/11 may be attributable to a president who was so involved in resolving the drama in his personal life that national security took a backseat. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson’s indiscretions with Sally Hemmings were overshadowed by his ambitious political achievements for the United States and he has been immortalised with the Rushmore Presidents (Medved, 2023). In this case, they both compromised personal integrity but one did not compromise national interests and hence was revered by the public.

One's personal morals are also the guiding lights of their journey and impact their thoughts and in the case of politicians, it has large scale ramifications. Whether we consider Iago's manipulation in Othello or look at the devastation wreaked by King Claudius in Hamlet or consider Big Brother in 1984 by George Orwell, they are all symbolic of totalitarianism and abuse of power (Coutu, 2014). Literature has time and again shown us how and why leaders need moral conviction and foresight. In the Nigerian book, 'Things Fall Apart', Okonkwo cannot cope up with challenges and refuses to let go of his rigid moral codes which lead to his downfall (Coutu, 2014). Similarly in Antigone, the protagonists have a single-minded focus to their personal agendas (Coutu, 2014). While religion drives Antigone, civic duty is Creon's focus. Their inability to find the middle path with each other leads to a series of tragedies. Personally speaking, humility is a very important trait that we need to ensure in our leaders. This allows them to admit their mistakes before their decisions affect others and their pursuit of truth and personal integrity are paramount to laying the foundation of a just and moral nation.

In the present world, a lot of discord could get stalled if leaders pursue peace above every political resolution. To quote Angela Merkel, "for a politician, the ability to compromise is an essential skill, but there are principles that should never be compromised." Some may argue that political regimes may be obligated to sacrifice innocent lives for the larger good of the nation. Ordering military action in the face of national security could be national duty and this may entail force, lies, secrets and a lack of transparency. This problem is known as "the problem of Dirty Hands" (Walzer, 1977) and may not fall under the usual moral radar of the personal values of politicians. Nonetheless, keeping the present Israel- Palestine or the Russia-Ukraine war as a backdrop, what ought to be non-justifiable is crossing permissible international conventions of war and ensuring immunity is provided to non-combatants. Combating terrorism is a genuine ethical dilemma but the juxtaposition of a politician's

personal agenda with routine transgressions is a deadly combination. It is also the inability to admit that things may have gone too far for their own political survival or facing a conflict between strongly held principles and navigating between them (Coutu, 2014). With the American presidential election bringing up a plethora of agendas, Trump has openly criticised the European financial obligations to NATO and threatened to walk out (Imbach, 2024). However, the EU maintains that to him, invoking Article 5 post 9/11, seems like a forgotten story and no nation has the obligation to be answerable to him (Anandhan, 2024). The world is waiting and watching the impact of how personal morals may change geopolitics and reshape international relations.

Fluidity of moral judgements is a concept that is relative-what may be good for the goose may not necessarily be good for the gander. The right wing and centre-right wing has seen a lot of resurgence across the world (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2016). Whether one looks at the American context, or the National Election studies of Italy, centre-left leaders are perceived as low on leadership but stronger on empathy as compared to the centre-right candidates. Most people look for traits like honesty, sincerity, warmth and then for competence and dynamism. The electorate has behavioural expectations from their political representatives, and neither of who may be wrong, so long as they understand that the baseline of morality should be upheld for the larger good of the nation (McLean, 1977). Queen Nehemiah in the Throne of Glass is an example of ambiguous morality (Coutu, 2014). A wise and intelligent Nehemiah loves her country and would go to any extent to save her people including manipulating her friends. I believe that it is important to understand that while morality is unarguably the foundation of good character, we cannot and should not expect flawless personalities and moral judgement in politics is often contextual. But in the case of this queen, do the ends justify the means? If one feels it does, then it is like opening Pandora's box of political manipulations.

Astute voters must also be wary of “trait ownership” that clever politicians may take advantage of and tailor their appeal according to voter patterns and after election, change their colours (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2016). The media plays a huge role in shaping public perception and citizens who are not politically aware may find themselves swept in the current of created fear-mongering and click-bait sensationalism. In contrast, conviction politicians link their individual morality to their political processes (Thornton, 2024). History shows that politicians can have divergent ideologies and yet be moral in their respective spheres. Margaret Thatcher saw privatization and expansion of home ownership as moral imperatives. She felt an open economy would generate financially independent people. Her opponent, Tony Benn, was a proponent of industrial democracy and economic redistribution for a larger good. Their moral and political ideologies represented and guided their differing visions for the United Kingdom, and they are a great example of how a voter, albeit from a different political affiliation could lean towards certain morals they identified with and yet respectfully disagree with the other.

Walzer (1977) argues that “a particular act of government may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong.” In Walzer’s view, the problem creates a paradox: the politician could “do wrong to do right” (p. 164).

Margaret Thatcher’s measures to undermine the power of the English trade unions which she felt were necessary for economic reforms was highly debated for its ethical basis. Yet, she is remembered as a moral leader as she felt that these policies were important to foster long term growth in the UK. Opinions may be varied regarding the means to the ends she wanted to achieve, however, her morality as a leader is usually above board. So as citizens who would like to see morality in politics, it is pertinent to remember that agreeing or disagreeing with political ideologies and visions should not be confused with immorality and personal biases must be set aside to work towards a better tomorrow.

The personal outlook, good judgement and morality of a politician is becoming even more relevant in today's times because ethical governance is the cornerstone of any well-developed nation (Pentecost, 2023). Moral leaders will prioritise common interests over personal gains. Their governance will ensure the efficient use of resources to maximise development. With the advent of new technologies, public policy is grappling with political and moral dilemmas and the decisions of politicians will largely depend on their personal value systems (Thompson, 2018). It is therefore important to choose representatives who can understand the need of changing societies. Their progressive mindset will come into play when topics like embryo research, reproductive advancements, nanotechnology, genetics etc will require formal sanction. Their maturity to apply the notions of theological rights or wrongs to moral judgements should be guided by reasoning and be context-dependant when required (Hull et al., 2024). While it may be hard for them to digress from party lines, their depth of character can steer modern societies to progress.

Political morals on social inclusivity are deeply rooted in religious and cultural prisms. Historical discrimination against homosexuality existed in most ancient societies- Genghis Khan made it punishable by death. Mary Whitehouse, a moralist against the liberal reforms of the 1960s showed that morality cannot be separated from politics (Thornton, 2024). And yet, Johanna Siguroardottir served as the first gay head of government and was known for upholding social justice. Leo Varadkar as the health minister in 2015 won the referendum for same-sex marriage with 62% of the electorate on his side (Doctor, 2024). As the taoiseach, he was the face of modern Ireland and was not afraid of courting controversy-whether it was announcing a referendum for the right to abortion or choosing to support Palestine as opposed to the EU stance. The Roe vs Wade case always been at the centre of many an American debate on the rights of women (Sasani, 2023). With the judgement that led to 24 US states banning all abortions by 2023, it is shocking that women in the United States will have fewer

rights than their predecessors (Al Jazeera, 2024). Similarly, despite 70% Americans, including 55% Republicans supporting LGBTQ marital rights, inclusivity from a legal lens is a distant reality especially in election year politics (Lempinen, 2022). In cases like this, ideal politicians should be those who ensure the safety and legal rights of all law-abiding citizens. When Princeton University changed the name of its Public Policy School from Wilson Woodrow, it proved that inclusive moral values in modern contexts need to change with times and should be an ongoing process.

One of the hardest challenges for politicians is probably resisting the flow of success and thereafter the interplay of power dynamics that can corrupt them (Hull et al., 2014). This is most evident when we look at the corruption in Africa. Mobut left Congo in a state of instability and Mugabe's allies benefitted from land reforms to the point of leaving Zimbabwe in utter poverty. Similarly, Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime and the 2011 revolution were an impact of citizens' held hostage by morally corrupt leaders. When we consider the immense success of series like *The Hunger Games*, where we see President Snow, a ruthless leader who orchestrated heinous crimes and exploited human suffering for his benefit, we feel fiction is melting into reality! This test of morality under extreme circumstances is reflective of Everdeen and her activism at one level and is a commentary on the desensitisation of audiences to violence at another level. Having said that, a bad leader is not necessarily always the one who is a dictator or is morally corrupt (Thompson, 2018). They can often be decent human beings who lack the vision to build great nations and can end up doing more damage to their countries. Hence, political acumen can also be categorised as a political moral value that must be upheld.

An important issue to be considered is that of individual corruption and institutional corruption which includes campaign finance (Thompson, 1995). While many may suggest that institutional corruption is the lesser evil, it is my firm belief that it can erode the social fabric



of a community or a country. Returning favours to the funding entities is in no way less than personal bribery or embezzlement which has accountability measures in place which serve as deterrents. This normalisation of institutional corruption should rate very high on our list of morality index red flags while voting for our representatives. In 2006, the Labour Party faced allegations that donors were awarded with life peerages and in Germany former Chancellor Helmut Kohl admitted that he had accepted illegal contributions. Which is the lesser evil in these cases? Or is this the beginning of the normalisation of moral lows? Let us look at the infamous Brazilian Car Wash scandal which had far reaching implications. With details pouring out and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, it saw the end of many political careers from various parties. The scandal had a huge impact on the economy, especially in the construction section. Many companies went bankrupt, international investors pulled back and common people suffered mass unemployment. Whether one considers public morality or private integrity, truth should be the foundation (Coutu, 2014). The Watergate scandal in America shaped American politics towards greater transparency and led to various financial, political and cultural reforms. Currently in this era of digitisation where human privacy is a pipe dream, it becomes even more important not to overlook either public or private transgressions.

To conclude, ethics and politics are compatible and elected representatives should maintain respectable conduct to ensure that there are no public consequences which may arise from unethical actions (Debnath & Chatterjee, 2021). Politicians must be responsible voices for all cross-sections of society, and they must ensure that their theological leanings should not colour their decisions. They should be guided by virtues that reaffirm that public discourse should pursue the larger good of their people and of the world. Hence, it is imperative for every citizen to care for the morals of politicians.

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