Contradictions—Argumentative Fallacy or Political Virtue?

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As a scholar of rhetoric I never entirely have understood why politicians continually live in fear of and inappropriately respond to the “gotcha” moment—those occasions when their political opponents or pundits accuse them of a contradiction in statement or behavior.

Recent Democratic presidential debates are replete with examples of this, whether the issue is criminal justice, gun control, bussing or healthcare. This tendency transcends the ideological leanings of candidates; whether it’s Vice President Joe Biden, Senators Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders or Cory Booker, the rhetorical refrain frequently is problematic.

The question we must ask is: Are alleged contradictions inherently a vice or might they be a virtue?

For over 40 years I have taught a class in argumentation. My students learn that what initially appears to be a contradiction is not always a fallacy. It is spurious only if nothing significant has transpired between the first statement or action and the second. If nothing has changed circumstantially, it may indeed be a fallacy; conversely, if we believe there have been important developments in the intervening period of time, then what appears to be a contradiction could actually
be a reasonable evolution of thought—perhaps showing one’s intellectual maturation and openness to persuasion.

I wonder, therefore, why politicians accused of contradictions more often don’t respond: “Time and circumstances are substantially different now than when I first said or did this. Don’t Americans want leaders who adapt, learn and are willing to change their mind, especially in a quickly evolving world? Wouldn’t clinging to all prior beliefs be a sign of dogmatism—an undesirable trait for those in government?”

Politicians—and all of us—should understand that what often seems like a vulnerability or weakness may turn out to be a strength.

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