Rhetorical Responses to “Gotcha” Moments in Politics

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

The Democratic presidential debates are replete with examples of this, whether the issue is criminal justice, gun control, bussing or health care. This tendency transcends the ideological leanings of candidates, whether it is Vice President Joe Biden or Sens. Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders or Cory Booker. The question we must ask: Are alleged contradictions inherently a vice or might they be a virtue?

For more than 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 in thought — perhaps showing one’s intellectual maturity and openness to persuasion.

I wonder, therefore, why politicians accused of contradictions more often don’t respond: “Time and circumstances are substantially different now from when I first said or did what you note. Don’t Americans want leaders who adapt and are willing to change their mind, especially in a quickly evolving world?”

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