

We want to hear that politicians won't just tell us what we want to hear

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So far, this presidential campaign season has been dominated by the narrative of the steadfast outsider. A July poll found that more than three-quarters of Donald Trump's supporters like him because he stands up to the media and isn't interested in political correctness. Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders, a secular Jew and registered Independent, is energizing the Democratic base—not by minimizing his European-style socialism, but by shooting straight. “He’s so authentic, he’s hip,” wrote Steve Winkler in the *Guardian*.

Then there’s Joe Biden, who hasn’t said yet if he’ll run. Stephen Colbert’s recent interview with the vice president was remarkable in many ways: Biden’s vulnerability in talking about his personal tragedies, both men’s willingness to talk about their Catholic faith, Biden quoting a Danish Lutheran existential philosopher on late night.

As compelling as any of it: Colbert’s warm-up question. “Everybody likes Joe Biden, right?” he said, stoking wild cheers. He went on:

I think it’s because when we see you, we actually think we’re seeing the real Joe Biden. You’re not a politician who’s created some sort of facade to get something out of us, or triangulate your political position or emotional state to try to make us feel a certain way. We see the real you. How did you maintain your soul in a city that is so full of people who are trying to lie to us in subtle ways?

After a joke about commuting from Delaware for years, Biden said this: “Why in God’s name would you want the job, if you couldn’t say what you believed?”

The audience started to cheer, because we love a straight shooter.

“Now, now, now,” he cautioned. “There’s nothing noble about this. Ask yourself the question, would you want a job that, in fact, every day you had to get up and you

had to modulate what you said and believe?"

With all due respect to the vice president—who in reality can work within the partisan morass of Washington as well as anybody—let me ask this question: Haven't you ever seen *Office Space*?

Tell me a job that exists in this world where you don't have to get up every day and modulate what you say and believe, who you are as an individual. Isn't that what we call adulthood? Show me a job where you can live fully into yourself, without having to worry about how you affect other people or what they think of you.

The world is too complex, the people around us too diverse, for any grownup to expect to just say whatever's on our minds or to act on whatever authentic impulses we might have. We think it's cute when children, lacking a filter, say what adults won't. But if someone is going to govern 300 million people with 300 million competing interests, that person is going to have to do a whole lot more *listening* than saying what's on their mind. You can call it "flip-flopping." Maybe it's just governing in a representative democracy.

Some Christians see Kim Davis as a model of faithfulness because she stood up to the big, bad, secular judges. It's a spiritualization of this kind of fierce independence, independence that amounts to stubbornness.

St. James, on the other hand, says divine wisdom is "willing to yield." Maturity lies in working through differences and arriving at new syntheses as we struggle together for a common good.

America faces tough challenges, and frankly I count myself among the majority of voters who lack the time, motivation, or wisdom to engage them deeply. Maybe that's why our forbears saw fit to found a republic rather than a pure democracy. We'd rather hear simple answers that echo back to us our ideologies. But such answers might not solve our problems—and even if they could, there would be too much opposition to implement them. If you believe in democracy, you believe in compromise.

Ironically, talk of "saying what you believe" is a way of telling us what we want to hear, of pandering to the zeitgeist. We can't be bothered with the complex negotiations of a nation this large and fragmented. We don't understand the issues well enough to elect people who actually represent our interests; we'll settle for

someone we think we can trust.

When deciding whom to trust, it's not a bad thing to consider how Trump or Sanders or Biden or any candidate stands on principle. But we ought to also consider whether they're willing to yield.