

This may shock you: Hillary Clinton is fundamentally honest

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Photograph: John G. Mabanglo/EPA

It's impossible to miss the "[Hillary for Prison](#)" signs at Trump rallies. At one of the Democratic debates, the [moderator asked Hillary Clinton](#) whether she would drop out of the race if she were indicted over her private email server. "Oh for goodness – that is not going to happen," she said. "I'm not even going to answer that question."

Based on what I know about the emails, the idea of her being indicted or going to prison is nonsensical. Nonetheless, the belief that Clinton is dishonest and untrustworthy is pervasive. A recent [New York Times-CBS poll found](#) that 40% of Democrats say she cannot be trusted.

For decades she's been portrayed as a Lady Macbeth involved in nefarious plots, branded as "a congenital liar" and accused of covering up her husband's misconduct, from Arkansas to Monica Lewinsky. Some of this is sexist caricature. Some is stoked by the "Hillary is a liar" videos that flood Facebook feeds. Some of it she brings on herself by insisting on a perimeter or "zone of privacy" that she protects too fiercely. It's a natural impulse, given the level of scrutiny she's attracted, more than any male politician I can think of.

I would be "dead rich", to adapt an [infamous Clinton phrase](#), if I could bill for all the hours I've spent covering just about every "scandal" that has enveloped the Clintons. As an editor I've launched investigations into her business dealings, her fundraising, her foundation and her marriage. As a reporter my stories stretch back to Whitewater. I'm not a favorite in Hillaryland. That makes what I want to say next surprising.

[Hillary Clinton](#) is fundamentally honest and trustworthy.

The yardsticks I use for measuring a politician's honesty are pretty simple. Ever since I was an investigative reporter covering the nexus of money and politics, I've looked for connections between money (including campaign donations, loans, Super Pac funds, speaking fees, foundation ties) and official actions. I'm on the lookout for lies, scrutinizing statements candidates make in the heat of an election.

The connection between money and action is often fuzzy. Many investigative articles about Clinton end up "raising serious questions" about "potential" conflicts of interest or lapses in her judgment. Of course, she should be held accountable. It was bad judgment, as she has said, to use a private email server. It was colossally stupid to take those hefty speaking fees, but not corrupt. There are no instances I know of where Clinton was doing the bidding of a donor or benefactor.

As for her statements on issues, Politifact, a Pulitzer prize-winning fact-checking organization, gives Clinton the [best truth-telling record](#) of any of the 2016 presidential candidates. She beats Sanders and Kasich and crushes Cruz and Trump, who has the biggest "[pants on fire](#)" rating and has told whoppers about basic economics that are embarrassing for anyone aiming to be president. (He falsely claimed GDP has dropped the last two quarters and claimed the national unemployment rate was as high as 35%).

I can see why so many voters believe Clinton is hiding something because her instinct is to withhold. As first lady, she refused to turn over Whitewater documents that might have tamped down the controversy.

Instead, by not disclosing information, she fueled speculation that she was hiding grave wrongdoing. In his book about his time working in the Clinton White House, [All Too Human](#), ABC's George Stephanopoulos wrote that failing to convince the first lady to turn over the records of the Arkansas land deal to the Washington Post was his biggest regret.

The same pattern of concealment repeats itself through the current campaign in her [refusal to release the transcripts](#) of her highly paid speeches. So the public is left wondering if she made secret promises to Wall Street or is hiding something else. The speeches are probably anodyne (politicians always praise their hosts), so why not release them?

[Colin Diersing](#), a former student of mine who is a leader of Harvard's Institute of Politics, thinks a gender-related double standard gets applied to Clinton. "We expect purity from women candidates," he said. When she behaves like other politicians or changes positions, "it's seen as dishonest", he adds. CBS anchor Scott Pelley seemed to prove Diersing's point when he asked Clinton: "Have you always told the truth?" She gave an honest response, "I've always tried to, always. Always." Pelley said she was leaving "wiggle room". What politician wouldn't?

Clinton distrusts the press more than any politician I have covered. In her view, journalists breach the perimeter and echo scurrilous claims about her circulated by unreliable rightwing foes. I attended a private gathering in South Carolina a month after Bill Clinton was elected in 1992. Only a few reporters were invited and we sat together at a luncheon where Hillary Clinton spoke. She glared down at us, launching into a diatribe about how the press had invaded the Clintons' private life. The distrust continues.

These are not new thoughts, but they are fundamental to understanding her. Tough as she can seem, she doesn't have rhino hide, and during her husband's first term in the White House, according to [Her Way](#), a critical (and excellent) investigative biography of Clinton by Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta, she became very depressed during the Whitewater imbroglio. A few friends and aides have told me that the email controversy has upset her as badly.

Like most politicians, she's switched some of her positions and sometimes shades the truth. In debates with Sanders, she cites her tough record on Wall Street, but her Senate bills, like one curbing executive pay, went nowhere. She favors ending the carried interest loophole cherished by hedge funds and private equity executives because it taxes their incomes at a lower rate than ordinary income. But, according to an article by Gerth, she did not sign on to bipartisan legislation in 2007 that would have closed it. She voted for a bankruptcy bill favored by big banks that she initially opposed, drawing criticism from Elizabeth Warren. Clinton says she improved the bill before voting for passage. Her earlier opposition to gay marriage, which she later endorsed, has hurt her with young people. Labor worries about her different statements on trade deals.

Still, Clinton has mainly been constant on issues and changing positions over time is not dishonest.

It's fair to expect more transparency. But it's a double standard to insist on her purity.