

# A lesson in characters, candidates and favorability

July 26, 2015

BY LISA JOHNSTON  
Special to The Star

In a Washington Post poll released in June detailing candidate favorability, a handful of fictional movie characters were included along with various presidential candidates. [Topping the poll with the most favorable ratings](#) were The Terminator, Darth Vader and the shark from "Jaws."

Most people find these results amusing and chalk them up to our general disdain for politicians. However, if we think about the results more carefully, the poll speaks volumes about what is required to be viewed favorably.

Many individuals, including politicians, assume higher favorability ratings result from being likable and agreeable. This drives some to craft responses to questions that contain little if any definitive positions or information in an attempt to avoid offending anyone. The assumption is that the bland, nebulous, middle road will keep them in the public's good graces.

Other politicians choose to tell the group that is paying attention what they want to hear. These candidates typically intend to change their tune at a later point. There is no better example of this phenomenon than the difference between candidate positions during a primary election and the general election.

When considering the fictional characters topping the favorability poll: Do any of them have a positive agenda? Is there any variability in their priorities? Are any of them attempting to pander to others in order to be liked? No, no, and absolutely not. So, why are these characters perceived favorably?

Three qualities drive these fictional characters' favorability: authenticity, consistency and strength in action.

**Authenticity:** The purpose and goals of these three characters are completely clear and obviously a true reflection of their nature. No one doubts the authenticity of what they say or do.

**Consistency:** These characters are pursuing their purpose at all times. They do not alternate between positions. You know where they stand.

**Strength in Action:** These characters are motivated and driven. Their effort to pursue their purpose is at the highest level at all times. They don't give up.

Sadly, these qualities are frequently lacking in our candidates for public office. Too often we have no confidence that politicians truly believe what they say. We observe them displaying chameleonlike changes in their positions, and we lack confidence that, if elected, they will act on their beliefs and put a steadfast effort into producing real results. Our doubts lead us to see them unfavorably.

Given the relationship of these three characteristics to favorability, it should not be surprising that Sen. Bernie Sanders tops the favorability rankings among actual candidates included in the poll. He is arguably one of the most authentic and consistent politicians, who forcefully advocates for what he believes.

The conventional notion that politicians should avoid taking positions or change positions to suit the current audience is dead wrong if favorability is a goal. We do not necessarily need to like or agree with someone to perceive them favorably.

Clearly, the outcome of a presidential election is based on a multitude of factors. Favorability does not always win the day. However, if our candidates for public office exhibited more authenticity, consistency and strength in action, citizens would be much more excited to vote and significantly happier with our elected officials.

Let's hope our candidates can learn from The Terminator and Darth Vader.

*Lisa Johnston of Overland Park is a former university administrator, the 2010 Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate and a 2012 candidate for Kansas Senate.*