



# The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment

By Elizabeth Markovits

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A growing frustration with “spin doctors,” doublespeak, and outright lying by public officials has resulted in a deep public cynicism regarding politics today. It has also led many voters to seek out politicians who engage in “straight talk,” out of a hope that sincerity signifies a dedication to the truth. While this is an understandable reaction to the degradation of public discourse inflicted by political hype, Elizabeth Markovits argues that the search for sincerity in the public arena actually constitutes a dangerous distraction from more important concerns, including factual truth and the ethical import of political statements.

Her argument takes her back to an examination of the Greek notion of *parrhesia* (frank speech), and she draws from her study of the Platonic dialogues a nuanced understanding of this ancient analogue of “straight talk.” She shows Plato to have an appreciation for rhetoric rather than a desire to purge it from public life, providing insights into the ways it can contribute to a fruitful form of deliberative democracy today.

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#### Review

“This original and provocative book contributes significantly to both classical political philosophy (the relationship of Plato’s dialogues to democracy, then and now) and democratic theory (deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, and feminist treatments of democracy). Markovits brilliantly connects her interpretations of Plato’s texts to our own thinking about important political questions, examining particularly the problematic role of sincerity in political communication. In so doing, she convincingly shows that these classical texts are valuable resources for citizens.”

—Gerald Mara, Georgetown University

“What could be wrong with plain speech? Plenty, as it turns out. The appeal to straight talk in politics, relying on sincerity norms in deliberative theory, and avoiding of the art of rhetoric in civic education can lead to a dangerous naïveté regarding modern sophistry. Elizabeth Markovits knows that we can do better. In place of the vain quest for communicative purity, this book offers vital resources for democratic participation.”

—Robert Hariman, Northwestern University

“Engagingly written and interesting, this book is useful for political theorists interested in democratic theory, rhetoric, and Greek thought.”

—D. J. Kapust, *Choice*

“This book is well worth reading, especially for those who are interested in Plato’s teachings on democratic rhetoric, and especially for those interested in *Gorgias*.”

—Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, *Review of Politics*

#### About the Author

Elizabeth Markovits is Assistant Professor of Politics at Mount Holyoke College.

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