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# Transparent government is no match for honesty

By [Lee Cataluna](#)

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By the time this newspaper is in your hands or on your screen, it will (hopefully) be over. The 2016 presidential election has been called “such epic ugliness” (by New York Times columnist Frank Bruni), “the worst election ever” (by Mother Jones) and “a horrifying glimpse at Satan’s Pinterest board” (by comedian and political commentator John Oliver).

Here at home, our local elections are like manini schoolyard skirmishes in comparison with the vitriol and brutality of the presidential election. They’re not on the same fight card. They’re hardly the same sport.

But today there has to be relief that, regardless of outcome, Hawaii can move on to the actual pragmatic concerns of rail, homelessness, taxes and bulky-item pickup. And if we’re lucky, maybe we can ditch the theoretical rhetoric around this strange idea of “transparency.”

When did that become the measure of a great leader?

Some writers have pointed to the post-Bernie Madoff era as the moment when “transparency” became crucial to citizens burned by the fiscal obfuscation that ultimately resulted in the Great Recession.

The ideal of transparency means all information about the workings of government, deals being made and the backgrounds and biases of those in power is both readily available to anyone who seeks it and easily understandable to the average citizen.

A more thorough definition is from President Barack Obama's administration, though it's worth noting that our outgoing president has been blasted for running an especially secretive administration:

"Transparency promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their Government is doing. ... Executive departments and agencies should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public."

Transparency is an essential thing in government. But it doesn't trump honesty.

Transparency means putting information online and responding to requests for documents. Honesty means telling the truth, even when you haven't been asked a question. It means doing the right thing even if nobody ever finds out and you won't get the credit. It means rejecting the canned talking points and saying, "I don't know" or "I was wrong" or "I'm sorry" when the situation calls for it.

Transparency means there's stuff there to look at if you want to poke around. Honesty means saying, "Hey, there's something I need to tell you," before anyone even starts poking.

Transparency puts every state employee's salary into a searchable database. Honesty means admitting that the highest-paid secretary in the department is indeed the boss's cousin.

Integrity means the boss wouldn't hire a cousin to begin with.

The Honolulu rail project, with its millions of pages of government documents and hundreds of public meetings, hasn't suffered from a lack of transparency. It's the lack of straight talk — honesty — about what this thing will really cost that has infuriated us.

Being honest is much harder than being transparent. Having integrity is hardest of all. Maybe today, with this horror of an election finished, we can stop accepting transparency as a watered-down substitute for truthfulness.

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