

What matters when you're picking a president?

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July 11, 2012

How should we decide who to vote for? [Paul Root Wolpe thinks](#) a candidate's personal ethics should be at the top of the list:

When we care about a candidate's character, we are really asking, Is this person authentic? Are their positions a true reflection of their inner values, or are they politically expedient? Is a change of opinion on an issue a result of the candidate listening to others, learning and making a principled decision, or is it a response to pressure, polls and popularity? . . . It is in the American character to care about our leader's values. We should be proud of that.

I don't exactly disagree, but I don't find this all that helpful, either. Especially not in reference to a presidential election (the hook for Wolpe's argument and the source of his examples, if not necessarily the only place it applies).

If you're going to evaluate candidates based on personal characteristics, values and ethics are certainly a more meaningful yardstick than looks, [height](#), taste for swing states' local delicacies, have-a-beer-with-ability or any of the other ridiculous things that seem to sway voters. But the more fundamental problem is that we spend way too much energy evaluating individual candidates for president in the first place. We do this because of two basic misconceptions about the presidency.

The first is that a president is an individual first and a party member second. That may be true in theory, but it doesn't really work that way these days. Whoever gets a major party's nomination, s/he—okay, so far just he—becomes almost entirely reliant on the party's networks of donors, fundraisers, operatives, volunteers, etc. On taking office, he's drawing from the same lists of potential executive and judicial nominees as any of his primary-season rivals would be. To get anything done, he needs allies in Congress. So Democrats govern mostly just like Democrats, and Republicans like Republicans. (Health-care reform's individual mandate—the policy the right most closely associates with "Obamacare"—was opposed by Obama during the 2008 primary and supported by Clinton. But who remembers?)

The second misconception is that the presidency is extremely, unimaginably powerful. In fact the office often can't get a damn thing done even when it does everything right—especially when it comes to domestic policy. It's not at all clear that the president does more to affect our lives than Congress does. It is clear that state and local governments do quite a bit *more* than the president. But how many people do you know who have strong feelings about Obama (one way or the other) yet don't even know who their representative and senators are, much less their state reps and city council members?

It's useful to consider ethics when thinking about Obama and Romney. It'd be even more useful to simply think about them less.