

Competence and intent

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In politics, competence sometimes serves as a rhetorical proxy for intent. Politicians like to talk about how terrific they/their ideas are. They aren't always as gabby about what they/those ideas aim to accomplish.

Example: privatization. Some conservatives insist that private enterprise is simply more efficient--more competent--than the government. So why not let the private sector take over certain public functions?

But even if we concede that business is categorically more efficient than government, there remains the question of *what* it's doing so efficiently. If it's a for-profit company, its primary aim is to make money--whatever service it provides, however enthusiastically, the bottom line is the bottom line. And a capitalist society has an interest in its companies making money! But that doesn't mean that efficient profit generation is by definition superior to less-efficient mission-driven service provision. Is a great apple always better than a decent orange?

Mitt Romney is using his personal competence to sell his fiscal plans. "I know how to fix the economy," he keeps saying, because he's managed big budgets in business and as governor of Massachusetts. So he can do it in Washington, too.

I don't doubt that he can. He's experienced and intelligent. I don't worry about Romney's competence; I worry about his intent.

To be clear, I do *not* mean that I question the governor's sincerity, patriotism or good will. I mean that when he says he knows how to handle a budget, I believe him--and I'd like to know how in particular he intends to do it. Because there's more than one way to do it.

The federal budget is a unique creature. Being governor is as good a preparation for the White House as any, but the budgetary part of the job is different in at least one crucial way: governors have to balance budgets, while the federal government does not.

Governors running for president often use this distinction to tout their deficit hawkery--a talking point that takes as given that a balanced federal budget is always desirable. Yet not so long ago, Keynesian stimulus was seen as conventional wisdom during an economic downturn. Some politicians might have preferred new program spending and others might have preferred middle-class tax cuts, but it's the same idea: there isn't enough money moving in the economy, so the government strategically injects some cash where it will be spent and multiplied in effect, leaving the balanced-budget goal for another day.

Romney isn't a fan of this theory, at least not in the broad strokes of his overall vision. He pushes supply-side economics: the government grows the economy by reducing its reach, by getting out of the way and giving business space to thrive. And whatever this theory's merits, it's important not to conflate supply-siders with deficit hawks. Like Keynesians, supply-siders intentionally run budget deficits--but for different reasons.

Across-the-board tax cuts add to the deficit. Yet supply-siders push for such cuts, counting on them to free up businesses to grow, in turn building the economy and eventually replacing the revenue lost in the tax cuts--a different kind of stimulus. And if the revenue isn't replaced, some say that's an opportunity, too: it creates a reason to cut spending. It's the old "starve the beast" strategy, budget deficits as a path to smaller government.

Conservative reformers of this ilk may campaign as deficit hawks, but they use deficits as a means to a different end. To be sure, politicians who support proactive government stimulus campaign as deficit hawks, too. People like the idea of a balanced budget, and politicians like saying things people like.

But when Romney says that he's going to make deep cuts to tax rates, counteract these by closing loopholes and make the whole thing pay for itself without new burdens on the middle class, the question isn't whether he's more or less competent a number cruncher than are the experts who say his plan is mathematically impossible. Yet his answer to their objection is essentially, *Trust me. I'm good with numbers, and I've balanced budgets before. I'm telling you my plan will do the following, and I should know.*

He is good with numbers, and he has balanced budgets before. But he's campaigning to lead an entity that doesn't have to balance its budget but can instead make strategic use of deficits. I don't question his competence; I question

his intent.