



It's Not (Just) About Competence

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After Democrats and Republicans concluded their national conventions, a strain of commentary emerged warning former Vice President Joe Biden against a replay of the home stretch of the 1988 campaign. That year, at the Democratic convention that nominated him, Michael Dukakis featured a theme of “competence” over “ideology.” On Election Day, he won in only ten states and the District of Columbia. Biden, emphasizing an even temperament as his sharpest contrast with President Trump, may be taking a similar risk. But Biden may also find a more meaningful comparison in the presidency of 1988’s winner: George H.W. Bush.

Bush, then a candidate struggling against what he clumsily called “the vision thing,” observed at his own convention that “competence makes the trains run on time but doesn’t know where they’re going.” The gauzy vision he himself proceeded to offer—“a kinder, gentler nation”—was short on specifics, except for the one concrete promise that helped torpedo his re-election four years later: “Read my lips: no new taxes.”

Yet Bush’s major successes as president, from the 1990 budget deal that paved the way for surpluses later in the decade to his meticulous conduct of the first Gulf War, were the result of exactly the competence he had derided as insufficient. Bush had guiding principles, of course, as did Dukakis. But Bush succeeded precisely because he also had the prudence required to apply those principles to the events he encountered.

Dukakis’s self-portrayal as a technocrat doubtless opened the way for the negative impressions the Bush campaign affixed to him. Technocracy without vision is sterile and uninspiring. In a democracy, it is always vulnerable to takeover by those offering inspiration. But vision without competence can be dangerous.

The impression that a president’s job is always to guide the American people toward his or her vision—as opposed to leading the executive branch prudently, according to the needs of the time—reflects what Gene Healy of the Cato Institute has called “the cult of the presidency.” The cult to which Healy refers is an almost mystical, messianic reliance on presidents for transformative leadership.

Virtually every incentive available to presidents encourages that belief. Historians' rankings of presidents do not vilify, but neither do they glorify, presidents like Bush for competent governance rather than transformational dreams. Prudence is not usually a ticket to having one's face on a coin or Mount Rushmore.

Nor is it usually a ticket to the White House. In teaching American politics, I often ask students to choose between three hypothetical candidates for public office. The first promises to focus on national security. The second commits to improvements in education. The third pledges to govern prudently according to the needs of the time. In years of doing that exercise, the third candidate has yet to receive a vote.

But the desire for presidential leadership rests on two assumptions that voters should question at every election. One is whether the times require dramatic change and, if so, on what principles it should be based. The second is whether that change should be the product of politics or of the informal mechanisms of civil society. Both questions can be answered, or mixed and matched, in favor of either Biden or President Trump. The problem is the blanket assumption that Americans must always be led.

The American character has always been restless. In the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noticed it almost immediately on his arrival in the United States. But the hustle and bustle he observed—the “extraordinary spectacle” of constant “activity and movement,” as he wrote in *Democracy in America*—was fundamentally a social rather than a political phenomenon.

Americans remain an active people, permanently unsatisfied with the status quo. But the activity that most defines us occurs outside the realm of national politics. That activity, which takes place largely in either our private lives or in voluntary associations, is hectic and productive precisely because it is not coordinated. If it required coordination, the one person least qualified to do it would be the necessarily isolated resident of the White House.

That does not mean political leadership never matters. There are moments, particularly during crises like the coronavirus pandemic, when it does. Moreover, private activity often fails to achieve goals a society values, and politics then enters. But a mature democracy should not require endless leadership from successive visionaries. More important, it should not desire it.

In that sense, the question this election presents is not the character of the candidates but rather the character of the times. The victor will, of course, need to lead the nation through the immediate and ongoing crisis of the pandemic. But elections are also notoriously bad at predicting the issues, like the pandemic, that their winners actually face. More important, the choices elected officials actually make day to day have less to do with glittering visions than with applying guiding values to changing circumstances.

Reflecting on the chaotic politics and unmet ambitions of the 1960s and early 1970s, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote that the politician's art was “not that of prophesying, but of coping.”

That is the fundamental choice between Biden and Trump. Both candidates offer competing values. The real question for voters is whether this moment requires coping or transformation. Trump promises the latter. Biden's best case is the former. For him, candidate Dukakis might not be a good model. President Bush would be.