Does It Matter?

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According to an old cliché, there are no dumb questions. But we’re asking one that might seem dumb—one that challenges some cherished assumptions about politics, presidents, and elections.

The question is this: What matters in choosing among presidential candidates? Does it matter if someone is ignorant of U.S. history, prone to eccentric views, belongs to an unfamiliar religion, doesn’t always speak correctly, gets confused about facts, or is given to unambiguously immoral sexual behavior? Are they likely to be a worse president because of those things?

More specifically, does it matter that Sarah Palin doesn’t know much about Revolutionary War history? Or does it matter that Michele Bachmann gets a little confused about American geography?

Does it matter that Rick Santorum thinks Social Security can be fixed by ending abortion? Or does it matter that both Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman are Mormons?

Or going back a little further, did it matter that George W. Bush often fractured his syntax speaking or that Bill Clinton was a cheating womanizer? Even further back, did it matter that Ronald Reagan often got facts wrong? Or did it matter that Gerald Ford seemed awkward in public, that both John Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower had mistresses, or that Franklin Roosevelt had a secret handicap?

Clearly in varying degrees these things did matter to the people affected by them. Palin and Bachmann presumably were privately embarrassed. Santorum seems to have rethought his Social Security solution. And both Romney and Huntsman understand they have an electoral problem because of the religion they share.

But the big question is, does any of this matter to us in selecting a president? And the even bigger question is, what should matter?

Judging from recent and not so recent evidence, it appears that such things matter very much to us. Our national obsession with “gotcha” politics fixates upon the inevitable faults, flaws, and faux pas of candidates.

Just the recent furor over the history gaffes by Ms. Palin and Ms. Bachmann make clear the importance we attach to such things. We cared enough to impeach Clinton over his behavior. Ford’s (undeserved) reputation for clumsiness didn’t help his reelection attempt. Kennedy’s Catholicism probably made his razor thin victory over Nixon closer than it would have otherwise been. And Franklin Roosevelt believed that general knowledge of his handicap would destroy his presidential career.

So the slips and spills of presidential candidates do matter to us—sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. Often they matter because we think they predict how effective a president a candidate would make. We often use these candidate foibles as handy proxies to forecast presidential success or failure.
So, Sarah isn’t going to make it because she doesn’t read enough. Michele will get us lost with her sense of geography. Bill will take the country to perditions because he is a cheater and so on and so on.

And what is the empirical evidence that someone’s knowledge level, someone’s religion, someone’s attention span, someone’s sexual ethics, etc. tell us whether they’re likely to be successful as president?

None! There is precisely zero good evidence that we can predict anything about a presidential candidate from knowing these sorts of personal or idiosyncratic things.

Maybe deep down we know that already. But we look to personal foibles anyway because they take less time than reading position papers, listening to debates, or going to rallies. That’s an understandable if not completely comfortable reason for using them.

Some of us, too, use personal foibles to make moral judgments about candidates, and that’s certainly defensible—as long as it’s remembered that they don’t often forecast much about future presidential performance. Kennedy’s religion, Franklin Roosevelt’s handicap, and Reagan’s penchant for tall tales foretold nothing about the presidents they would become.

Similarly, Palin’s knowledge of history, Romney’s religion, or Bachmann’s geographic skills tell us nothing about the president they would be. It may make interesting copy and provide titillating details and enough material to keep the talking heads busy for weeks. But does it tell us what kind of president a candidate would make? Not so much. It simply doesn’t matter.

Fixating on candidates’ foibles, however, brings a greater risk than merely wasting time. More serious is the danger that preoccupation with things that don’t matter puts us in hazard of missing what does matter. Even a cursory review of modern presidents suggests we have not always been making the best choices.

Since at least 1972, Americans have not been markedly happy with their presidents. Three presidents (Ford, Carter, and Bush 41) were rejected outright for second terms. Another was impeached, and another was forced to resign. The most recent, George W. Bush, finished his term near record-low approval ratings, while the incumbent Obama is experiencing low public approvals in his third year in office. Only Reagan was an unqualified success.

With a record like this maybe we are doing something wrong. Maybe we are spending too much time worrying about things that don’t matter in electing a president—and too little time thinking about things that do.

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