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Should Presidents Be Experts?

Abstract

"What does an elected official at the highest levels of our democracy need to know? This is a pressing issue perhaps this election year more than any other in recent memory."

Posting about the knowledge and skill required for presidential office from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/should-presidents-be-experts/>

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Should Presidents Be Experts?

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Donald Roth

August 15,
2016

What does an elected official at the highest levels of our democracy need to know? This is a pressing issue perhaps this election year more than any other in recent memory. On the Right, many have affirmed Donald Trump's serious character flaws and apparent lack of policy expertise but argued that he won't actually do much as president, and we should favor him [because of his ability to negotiate](#) or [because of who he can appoint to do the real work](#). On the Left, Hillary Clinton has promised to "[sweat the details](#)" and micromanage policy issues in a nod to common perception of Clinton as a bit of a technocrat. Apart from the policy differences between the two candidates, they present very different responses to the question of expertise. One seems to answer, "I don't need to be an expert because I'll hire them," while the other says, "I don't need to hear from experts because I am one." So, are either of these positions right? What expertise, if any, should we look for in a president?¹

Breadth, not Depth

In [A View from the Top](#), Michael Lindsay, president of Gordon College, shares the results of his extensive study of individuals at the very top of the political, business, and nonprofit world. One of the most consistent findings of his research was that leaders at the highest level were generalists, not specialists. This does not mean that these individuals lacked deep knowledge of a variety of topics; instead, it means that these individuals were usually Renaissance men and women, maintaining a broad range of interests and an ability to engage at reasonable depth on many topics.

So, part of the answer to the question of expertise is that while we should expect our presidents to be learned people, a successful president is unlikely to be at the cutting edge of expertise in any one field. This may explain why the candidacy of people like Ben Carson have traditionally fizzled. While he is an expert in neurosurgery, he struggled to branch out into fields like [foreign policy](#). In Lindsay's book, neurosurgeon and CNN chief medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta credits Clinton with getting him to "exchange the microscope for a telescope." In a sense, Trump is right that a president does not need to be an expert on all issues, but Clinton is more on the track to what Lindsay is getting at.

The expertise of a president is in breadth, not depth of inquiry, but it is still significant knowledge, not so much to the level of guiding research in any one field as it is to having a base of knowledge to help in casting forward a vision about what may help all fields flourish.

Gardener over Chessmaster

Even if a president should be more of a jack of all trades than a master of any one policy area, the role certainly requires a certain expertise in leadership, right? Absolutely, but it's essential to think about how we imagine leadership as well. If our imagination is guided by television, it's easy to imagine an expert leader to be a sort of puppet-master, like *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood, cleverly pulling strings and trading influence to make his minions dance to his tune. Or perhaps instead we think of someone like Napoleon, once able to [convert an army sent to stop him](#) by the force of his charisma alone and a master strategist who disciplined and drilled his troops so that he could control them like pieces on a chessboard.

However, retired U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, who successfully reorganized U.S. military forces to more effectively combat insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, argues that the metaphor that should guide the modern leader is of a master at gardening, not chess. In his excellent book, [Team of Teams](#), McChrystal argues for leaders to empower those under them, tending to the maintenance of the culture and priorities of the organization, rather

than trying to dictate its every move.

The President of the United States sits at the head of a massive bureaucracy that has an enormous regulatory breadth. It is literally impossible to conceive of a president effectively micromanaging that apparatus. Abraham Lincoln is perhaps most famous for collecting a cabinet full of dissenting voices that could lend a voice of wisdom to refine his policy decisions, and George Washington made a number of visionary appointments, such as that of Alexander Hamilton, and significantly empowered them to pursue the flourishing of their respective charges. Ultimately, the president should be an expert leader, but this is a task in vision-setting and tending rather than micromanagement or outsourcing, and on this count, neither Clinton nor Trump seem to fit the bill particularly well for opposite reasons.

Building an Office-Conscious Power

If a president should be “looking through a telescope, not a microscope” and tending a garden of talented subordinates toward certain goals, the question remains what those goals should be. If the president is casting a vision and cultivating a culture, what should those be? I won’t speak to the policy priorities and specific issues that I think a president should emphasize, because that would dive too much into partisan politics, and, while that issue is usually the deciding factor in the vote people cast, I think there is another aspect that more broadly characterizes what expertise a president should have, and that is an expertise and depth of thought on philosophy of government.

A recent translation of Abraham Kuyper’s [*Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*](#) is both a beautiful example and an excellent model of what I mean. Kuyper builds his vision for government on a sense of office-consciousness. That is, rulers should not imagine they are invested with power in their persons by divine right; instead, power is tied to office and function, which is delegated down from the source of all power and authority. A principle of delegated power carries with it a sense of restraint and responsibility that also cautions the government against using its considerable power over individuals and institutions to usurp the authority delegated to those other bodies. It embodies a vision of human flourishing which sees us as individuals, yes, but deeply and dependently woven into institutions and communities. It reflects respect for the potential tyranny of excessive accumulations of power, and it takes a long view toward doing justice.

This is the culture that I believe a president must seek to expertly cultivate, and this is the vision of national flourishing that I believe the president should seek to cast. Unfortunately, I don’t believe either major party candidate embodies such a vision. Trump sounds like a tyrant with little regard for office, and Clinton, although more aware of office, sounds like she seeks to push the bounds of the power it entails. Regardless of how you plan to vote this November, I believe we must push for better in four years, and I think that seeking a president with the characteristics I’ve mentioned may be a path to that better choice. What do you think?