

# Picking a President: Charisma or Competence?

By Karl Albrecht

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Every four years in the United States, we go through an exercise in emotionalism called “electing the President.” Then we have four years to discover the consequences of our hypothalamic decisions.

Picking a president has degenerated to just another of the many channels of entertainment that help Americans avoid the stress of using their gray matter. The melodramatic theatrical production that is the presidential election process is so completely addictive to all participants – the news industry, the marketers of the candidates, and most of the citizens of the country – that rational thought and discourse seem strangely alien, an unwelcome distraction from our amusement.

In my occupation (management consulting), I regularly work with senior executives in business and government. Any corporate board of directors seeking to fill a vacant chief executive position would typically engage a professional search firm to locate promising candidates. And the searchers would not even start the process without an answer to one fundamental question: “What skills are you looking for?” The board has to decide what *critical competencies* are required to guide this organization, at this point in its history, and into the business environment they expect it to face.

Any board that chose a CEO based on whim, emotion, personal biases, prejudices, or hunches would be considered derelict, and open to severe criticism from many directions. They don’t ask “What’s his position on employee pay and benefits?” Or, “Would she keep the artwork in the corporate lobby?” Those are incidental to the one big question: Can this person lead and manage this organization effectively?

Yet, most Americans seem quite willing to hire the most powerful executive in the land by means of a national beauty contest. A very large percentage of them readily admit that they settle for one particular candidate after rejecting all the others they consider less beautiful. Ask T.C. Mits (The Celebrated Man In The Street) why he favors the candidate he favors and by the second sentence you’ll usually hear what he doesn’t like about the other one.

But public interest in the 2008 elections is running unusually high, and more and more people seem to feel that the traditional circus-style election process may

not be serving them well. Many of them seem to feel that we need a better way – a different kind of conversation.

### *Is There A Better Way?*

I think there is indeed a better way: I decided to tap into some of the best minds on the planet to discover a *presidential leadership model* – a set of meaningful evaluation criteria that thoughtful people can use to decide whom they want to run their lives.

This is not a new idea. Many years ago I proposed the idea to one of my editors. At that time it took the form of a "voter's handbook," a sort of journal that people could use to rate the candidates on some reasonably meaningful criteria other than personality, hairdo, or an attractive wife.

The idea would be to interview some of the world's top thinkers and experts on leadership, and to put together a simple *competence model*, maybe 6-8 key criteria: What *high-level skills* does a US President need to lead the nation effectively?

The intent would be to promote the competence model as a rational basis for choosing a president (and possibly other high-level elected leaders), and the book might be one of the main vehicles.

After he listened to the idea, my editor chuckled and said, "That's a great idea. I'll bet I can sell at least 10 copies — including the ones your Mom buys." I suppose he was right then, but I've never given up on the idea.

### *There's No Right Answer to the Wrong Question*

Unfortunately, the skills one needs to get elected to a public office are not the same skills needed to do the job. In fact, the two skill sets have almost nothing in common. If we elect our leaders for the wrong reasons, should we be surprised when we discover that they're not up to the job?

Most Americans have typically chosen their presidential candidates – mostly males, so far – based on two questions, the answers to which are pretty much irrelevant to their performance once they get into office:

1. Do I like him? and,
2. What is he promising me?

So, the two secrets to getting elected, currently, are *popularity* and *pandering*. On the first count, the candidates are subjected to a never-ending charisma test. How well do they make speeches? How well do they perform on talk shows? How do they handle themselves in debates? Have they mastered the sound bite? Do they have "character?" Are there skeletons in their personal closets? Are the candidate and his or her spouse a "nice couple?" Would the spouse be an asset to the candidate? Can we visualize them as classy occupants of the White House?

On the second count, the candidates find themselves in the precarious position

of trying to pander to a constellation of disparate selfish interests. How well does the candidate appeal to women? Blacks? Hispanics? Labor unions? Farmers? The wealthy? Teachers? Industry executives? Religious people? The south? The heartland? The “conservatives?” The “liberals?” The “center?”

Cynical reporters and political commentators tend to perpetuate this self-centered, narcissistic view of voters by assigning each candidate a “base” – a social, economic, or ethnic category of people to whom he or she is obligated to appeal. We seem to have long ago given up the notion that the president is the servant-leader to the whole nation, not the panderer to the special interests of the groups most likely to deliver the most votes.

Those two cherished selection criteria – popularity and pandering – are virtually useless in predicting how effectively a candidate will actually perform in the office of the presidency, for two simple reasons. One is that “personality,” while important in getting along with people and in getting things done, does not equal competence. There are likable people who fail miserably in leadership jobs, abrasive people who perform well, and *vice versa*. There’s much more to leadership than getting people to like you – although it can certainly help.

The other traditional criterion – what the candidate promises – is also a bogus reason for choosing one candidate over another. The simple reason for this is that the candidate’s capacity to deliver on the promises *cannot be known until after the election*. A would-be president can promise tax cuts, health care reform, or more defense spending, but many uncontrolled factors enter into the political algebra that actually gets things done.

Obviously, for example, a president who belongs to one political party, facing a Congress that’s been captured by the other party, will have a very different set of options than one whose party has won control of both houses. And, quite aside from such political realities, cataclysmic events and unforeseen developments can derail a presidential agenda and confront a president with a new reality for which he or she is wholly unprepared.

Consider that Lyndon Johnson’s dream for his presidency was to implement his concept of the “Great Society” – the virtual defeat of poverty within one generation. But as the Vietnam war spun out of control, Americans saw a different president than the one they thought they’d elected. Similarly, the cataclysm of “9-11” presented George Bush, Jr. with a scenario entirely different from anything envisioned by him or by voters in the 2000 election. The rules of the game changed, as they often do.

A distant third question, sometimes posed with knowing aplomb by media commentators is “Does the candidate have the political experience needed to be President?” Most historians seem to agree that prior experience in elective office is a rather weak predictor of success in the presidency. Some presidents have earned high scores in history with little or no elective experience, and some with extensive experience have flunked.

Where does that leave us? With the realization that *we’ve mostly been asking the*

*wrong questions*. By framing the questions more intelligently, we may be able to elevate the narrative that dominates the public discourse leading up to the 2008 elections.

### *Character and Competence – A President Needs Both*

We now need to ask: What *fundamental leadership competencies* are required of a president to serve the country effectively? Aside from pandering and promises, transient issues and selfish appeals, appearance, and “electability,” are there a critical few things a president should be able to *do* skillfully?

At the same time, we must not overlook the question: What basic *traits of character* are required to lead a nation such as the United States? Clearly, competence without character can also be dangerous. A strong and determined leader who lacks a moral compass can do as much harm – or more – as a well-meaning leader who lacks the key skills to turn ideas into action.

If we can answer those two questions, even imperfectly, we may learn how to choose leaders who can rise above the changing political fortunes of parties and party politics, transcend the accidents of history, get the big things done, and lead us where we need to go.

The *character* side of the coin, so to speak, is somewhat easier to specify than the competence side. But even in that department, we can do better than we have in specifying the presidential character traits we consider critical to leading the nation. We can name various dimensions such as “honesty,” “integrity,” “vision,” “credibility,” “moral values,” “courage,” “openness,” “conviction,” and “decisiveness,” but we need to define and concentrate on the critical few if we’re going to have an intelligent discourse about presidential leadership.

The *competence* section of the presidential leadership score card requires more careful thought, and this is where the need for expert opinion comes in. Competencies, as contrasted to traits, are what someone *does* – or, at least, has proven himself or herself capable of doing. In business, for example, *building a strong management team* might be an important executive competence. Another might be *anticipating critical business trends*; another might be *setting strategic priorities*. Prior experience, however, is not a competence. Neither is “feeling our pain.”

Never having given up on my quixotic idea of picking a president based on the capacity to actually lead, I recently took up the question again. I combed all the books in my library dealing with high-level leadership, looking for key competencies. I contacted a number of prominent academic experts I know, and asked them to nominate key competencies. I considered my own experience of over thirty years consulting to top executives, and tried to recall the things they’d told me.

Then, of course, I decided to “go to the Net.” I solicited the inputs of a group of professional business consultants who belong to an international online community focused on leadership and organizational performance. Of the 1500 members of this expert diaspora, about 100 decided to play.

First, I presented them with an alphabetical list of about 75 commonly known character traits, and asked them to choose the “top ten” they considered most critical for a US President.

Next, I went back to the experts and asked them to submit as many key competencies as they could think of – in any form, any terminology, any degree of generality or specificity. Of about 450 competency terms they submitted, about fifty were actually focused and definitive enough to be useful. I combined these potential competencies with the others I’d collected from interviews and the book reviews, and narrowed them down to about 20.

By massaging and restating the various potential competencies, I finally managed to boil down the list to nine, arranged in an order that seemed to make sense conceptually. The sidebar chart shows the top-ten traits and the top-nine competencies.

Then, I put up a website, [pickingapresident.com](http://pickingapresident.com), and provided an online voting form, which visitors could use to assess any or all candidates, as they saw them, on the top-ten character traits and the top-nine competencies. They could also view the accumulated scores for each candidate.

When I looked at the voting data provided by the website visitors, I was able to draw only one clear conclusion: My Editor Was Probably Correct.

To say that people did not exactly stampede to the website would be the understatement of the decade. After placing links on my firm’s commercial website, sending out email announcements to several hundred friends and acquaintances, announcing the website on various online groups, informing some of the most influential bloggers, and informing a fairly large list of political media celebrities, I counted less than 100 visitors who rated any of the candidates. Probably no more than 1000 people even visited the site.

### *What I Learned*

This exercise has helped me enormously in clarifying my own political views. Now I know where I stand: I’m voting for the guy with the best-looking wife – if he promises not to mess with Social Security.

## **Sidebar: Presidential Traits and Competencies**

### Presidential Leadership Project - 2008

#### Key Presidential Character Traits

(Expert ratings of top ten traits, 86 responses)

<b>Trait</b>	<b>% Who Selected as Critical</b>
1. Trustworthy	77.01 %
2. Intelligent	59.77 %
3. Visionary	58.62 %
4. Collaborative	49.43 %
5. Courageous	49.43 %
6. Authentic	43.68 %
7. Open-minded	43.68 %
8. Compassionate	40.23 %
9. Wise	40.23 %
10. Articulate	39.08 %

#### Key Presidential Competencies

(Synthesized from over 400 contributions)

1. Global/Strategic Thinking
2. Building, Selling, And Modeling A “Big Vision” For The Country
3. Engagement (Skillful Use Of Self)
4. Leading Public Opinion
5. Leading The Executive Team
6. Political Autonomy
7. Building Coalitions
8. Advocating America’s Highest Values
9. Representing America To The World