

COMPETENCE VERSUS POPULISM

A number of people are pointing to David Frum's seeming come-to-Jeebus realization that Conservatives should beware of picking incompetent hacks in the guise of political loyalty.

Here's the lesson to learn: It's always important to respect the values and principles of the voters. But politicians who want to deliver effective government and positive results have to care about more than values – and have to do more than check their guts. They need to study the problem, master the evidence, and face criticism.

It's not only conservatives who succumb to gimmicks of course. The left still feels a lingering attachment to socialism, the most disastrous gimmick of them all. Tough-minded conservatives slashed that illusion to pieces decades ago. But since then, we have begun to go a little easy on ourselves. And over the past half dozen years, the consequences of our militant anti-elitism has come home to roost.

If elitism means snobbishness, then of course it is a vicious thing. If it means being impressed by credentials instead of evidence, then again: good riddance. But if it is elitist to expect politicians to be able to see through glaringly false and stupid ideas – well in that case, call me elitist.

But few note where Frum's criticism is directed: to those who support Mike Huckabee or Ron Paul.

The currently front-running candidate in Iowa, former Arkansas governor Mike

Huckabee, has built his campaign on a plan to abolish the Internal Revenue Service and replace the federal income tax with a national sales tax.

Economists and tax experts virtually unanimously agree that the plan is beyond unworkable – that it is downright absurd. (It does not help that it was originally drafted by the Church of Scientology.)

[snip]

Just a little lower down in the polls is a libertarian candidate named Ron Paul. Paul is best known for his vehemently isolationist foreign policy views. But his core supporters also thrill to his self-taught monetary views, which amount to a rejection of everything taught by modern economists from Alfred Marshall to Milton Friedman.

Mind you, I'm not here to defend the competence of Mike Huckabee or Ron Paul. But I can't help but notice that Frum's rant happened to target two guys who happen not to believe in corporatism. So while I'm all in favor of Republicans considering competence in their selection of politicians and candidates, I'm not convinced Frum is looking any further than a person's adherence to his own (Frum's) ideology as a measure for competence. If you're going to talk about economic failures, after all, why not talk about Alan "Bubbles" Greenspan, who talked up ARMs so he could sustain an unsustainable housing bubble, and who is the man most responsible (among thousands of responsible men and women, no doubt) for the housing crash that is devastating our nation's economy.

Mind you, now that Bubbles is advocating bailing out big shitpile, maybe Frum will begin to find him "incompetent" too. But for the moment, Frum's call for competence is nothing more than a call for ideological purity.