

Mr. Trump and Secretary Clinton: An Evangelical Assessment

By: Bruce Ashford with Josh Wester

Electing a president is a decision of great consequence. Every four years, the American people face the task of determining our nation's leader. The process is always difficult. But this year that difficulty is compounded by the fact that the nominees of both major political parties are historically unpopular.

As a result, many citizens are being forced to ask more fundamental questions. And conservative evangelicals are no exception. Most of us have deep reservations about Mr. Trump and Secretary Clinton.

During this election cycle, significant controversies have surrounded both candidates and their respective campaigns. Indeed, Bruce has briefly critiqued both Sec. Clinton ([here](#) and [here](#)) and Mr. Trump ([here](#) and [here](#)). But as November 8th draws near, a question we often encounter in conversation, in the classroom, and in public venues is: how does one evaluate a presidential candidate?

In this article, we provide an assessment of both major party nominees. After considering each candidate in view of four criteria, we offer our conclusions for consideration. Our assessment is *an* evangelical evaluation (not *the* evangelical evaluation); our hope is that, even if a reader disagrees with aspects of our analysis or our conclusion, the article will still be a beneficial contribution to the broader exercise of evaluating political candidates or platforms from an evangelical point of view.

1. Political Ideology

The significance of the first criterion—political ideology—can hardly be overstated. Ideology wields an incalculable influence over a person, and thus our discussion of this subject is necessarily extensive.

Donald Trump

Hillary Clinton is a progressive. Gary Johnson is a libertarian. Evan McMullin is a conservative. But with Mr. Trump, it is not so easy. Is he a populist? A pragmatist? A moderate? Like any other politician, he would govern within [an ideological framework of some sort](#)—no matter how loosely defined. But discerning Trump's controlling ideology is difficult.

Mr. Trump is the nominee of the Republican Party, a party that has, for nearly a century, nominated a conservative of some stripe for the presidency. But Mr. Trump is not a conservative in any conventional, American sense of that word. His campaign does not center on small-government or pro-growth policies (economic conservatism). He mentions, but does not emphasize, issues related to the family, the pro-life movement, or religious liberty (social conservatism). And until the third presidential debate, he had not seemed to show any

comprehension of, or interest in, the debate about judicial activism and constitutional interpretation (constitutional conservatism).

It is clear, however, that Mr. Trump is animated by a less well-defined ideology: *nationalism*. Nationalism is an ideology in which members take their political identity from the larger community, which they consider to be an extension of a more basic tribal order. That larger community may center on a language, ethnicity, culture, religion, ancestry, geographical location, or nation-state. Mr. Trump's brand of nationalism tends to vary, sometimes focusing on the nation-state, other times centering on ethnicity or culture. In other words, he sometimes focuses on the United States vs. other nations, but at other times seems to be channeling the white working class of the United States against other people groupings within our nation.

In its pure forms, nationalism subtly encourages the absolutization (worship) of its own community and tends to view external influences as malevolent. Adherents wish to keep their community and culture from being influenced by communities and cultures different from their own. Further, it tends to foster authoritarian tendencies.

Mr. Trump's version is best understood as a garden-variety *ethnic nationalism* accompanied by a reflexive *anti-globalism*. It was this message Mr. Trump brought to the fore during the Republican primaries. Nationalism tends to grow in the mixed soil of economic recession and large-scale immigration. Through his populist brand of nationalism, especially in blaming immigrants and failed political leadership, Mr. Trump has given voice to widespread sentiments of resentment and despair over America's decline.

The effect of Mr. Trump's rhetoric has been to reorient the political divide in our nation from "conservative vs. progressive" to "open country vs. closed country." Mr. Trump is committed to moving the United States toward a more isolationist position culturally (by closing the borders), economically (by restricting free trade), militarily (as his foreign policy impulses tend to mirror those of President Obama).

Mr. Trump's nationalism has [featured prominently in his campaign](#). From his slogan, "Make America Great Again," to his promises to build a wall along the Mexican border and to curtail free trade—[including threats to destroy NAFTA](#)—Mr. Trump has everywhere infused his message of anti-globalism into his pursuit of the presidency. Mr. Trump's campaign is an attempt to [reshape American politics](#) along nationalist lines. This is a significant historical change. For nearly a century the fault line in American politics has been big government versus small government, but throughout his campaign Mr. Trump has worked to create a new fault line: open nation versus closed nation.

Nationalism is not just the substance of Mr. Trump's campaign, but also the tone. On the economy, [he says](#), "We're gonna turn it around, we're gonna turn it around fast, we're gonna become rich again, we're gonna become great again!" On immigration, "Oh we love that wall don't we? Don't we love that wall? That wall's gonna happen folks." On trade, "Now, Germany is an economic behemoth, they don't pay us very much. We lose on everything. We don't win anymore, folks. We are gonna start winning like you've never seen anything win before. We

have all the cards. We have the cards!” And so forth. Without fail, Mr. Trump’s emphasis is on the nation as superior, the nation as a winner in a global game of one-upmanship.

Combining nationalism with authoritarian rhetoric, Mr. Trump tells the nation that we are in the midst of an [overwhelming crisis](#) (concerning economic recession and foreign immigration) that is beyond the reach of traditional solutions. According to Mr. Trump, we (and white nationalists interpret his “we” as signifying [white Americans](#)) are victims who need to be saved and [he alone is capable](#) of incarnating our historical destiny in order to save us; that with unmatched credentials and superior instincts, only he can make us great once again. [Nathan Pippenger writes](#):

Trump’s campaign is an attempt not only to define America in exclusive terms but also to coarsen what it means to belong to that nation: to hate, to mock, to fear outsiders, to promote one’s own interests at the expense of strangers and despise anyone not as strong; to reassure ourselves of America’s might and salivate at what it will achieve when it is no longer held back—to achieve our country through Trump, not through one another.

Mr. Trump rightly wants us to have pride in our nation. Pride in one’s nation (patriotism) can lead to a healthy respect for fellow citizens, a catalyst for civic virtue, a motivator for building a strong work ethic and an admiration for the sacrifices made by the nation’s military. Further, he should be commended for pointing out some of the serious drawbacks of globalism and globalization, especially on the American working class. But he has gone beyond patriotism into an isolationist nationalism (economically, and sometimes militarily) that is a deficient response to globalism. He has also encouraged a type of ethno (e.g. white) nationalism that is an unacceptable response to what is perceived to be a resurgent black nationalism. Mr. Trump and his campaign have coarsened public life by denigrating and demeaning those who are different from us, refusing to distance himself quickly and decisively from white supremacists during the primaries, and employing a strategy that disrespects human dignity and pours gasoline on the fires of civil unrest and international conflict.

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton is both a liberal and a progressive. Her animating ideological impulses are *liberal* in the sense that she wishes every American to be liberated from social and moral norms (such as traditional views concerning gender, sexuality, and the rights of unborn human beings). Sec. Clinton is *progressive* in the sense that she emphasizes the need to move beyond the flaws and evils of our heritage. These include not only social and moral norms, but economic norms which she argues stack the deck in favor of a small number of wealthy Americans.

Sec. Clinton is not as progressive by nature as she is by circumstance. The unexpected dynamism of Bernie Sanders’s candidacy has forced her to move even further in that direction, and caused her to repeatedly reverse her own positions. For example, in 2008 she supported the idea of delegating Social Security funding problems to a bipartisan commission. In 2016, though, she wishes only to maintain or expand such funding. As Secretary of State, she supervised negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2012, calling it “the gold standard.” Now, she opposes it. And in years past, her criticisms of Wall Street merely constituted obligatory talking

points, while in this campaign, her criticisms of the investment banking community have become increasingly heated and pointed.

Sec. Clinton's brand of liberalism emphasizes liberty by encouraging citizens to expect the government to accommodate their personal desires—and to accommodate them in a religiously and morally neutral manner. More to the point, it expects the government never to cast moral judgments on a person's desires (unless the views in question are out of step with progressivism). Thus when poor judgment or immoral choices cause negative consequences, liberalism expects the government to ameliorate those consequences. No questions asked. (e.g. "Should you have children out of wedlock, the government is happy to marry you in order to take care of them. Or even happier to terminate them in the womb—cheaply and efficiently—before such care is required.")

The environment produced by late modern liberalism and exemplified by Sec. Clinton's liberalism is truly problematic. [As Bruce has written elsewhere](#):

It finds itself in a real dilemma: on one hand, it has deified individual autonomy and free choice; on the other hand, it naturally inclines to pull the levers of government to assist when that autonomy doesn't work out well. Thus government intervention increases, even though this runs contrary to classical liberalism's entire aim...

The negative consequences of political liberalism are manifold, but foremost among them are the ironic loss of freedom because of the expanse of government, and the loss of human flourishing because of the sidelining of moral law. The liberal ideology buys the lie that expelling God from the system will lead to greater fulfillment...

Liberalism also realizes that a transcendent morality conflicts with choice enhancement and desire fulfillment. Thus it is willing even to overthrow any moral underpinning that threatens its god of individual autonomy. It encourages its citizens to suspend moral judgment and dispense with religious and moral convictions...

Elaine Storkey puts it well when she writes:

The culture of individualism is vast...and goes far beyond the political realm. It is bolstered, for example, by a daily reinforcement of themes such as success, happiness, reward, personality, choice, independence, and self-discovery. The result is a philosophy of life that sees relationships as externally constructed, and centered around fulfillment, happiness, or some self-constructed goal or ideal to which the dynamics of relationships become subject...

Liberalism, as an ideology, enthrones the self.

In addition to Sec. Clinton's liberalism, we also take issue with [her progressivism](#):

In the United States, progressives tend to pair with liberalism in pushing for social reform that maximizes individual autonomy. In order for individuals to have maximum

autonomy, especially sexual autonomy, progressives seek to redefine what it means to be human, what it means to be a man or a woman, and what it means to be moral...

Human beings, secular progressives argue, are not created in the image and likeness of God (to be created in God's image would make us accountable to God, after all). Human beings are, instead, advanced animals who only differ from animals in their consciousness and functionality...

[Many progressives] want to separate a person's identity from his or her body. The true "self," in this understanding, is independent of the corporeal, so much so that a person can mutilate his body in order to bring it into conformity with his true identity. We are not men or women by birth, but by choice...

As J. Budziszewski notes, progressivism promotes a type of tolerance that requires us to avoid having strong convictions—except, ironically, for the convictions progressives deem good. When and where progressivism overturns traditional morality, it attempts to absolve itself from responsibility for decisions: *"I am not pro-abortion; I am pro-choice."* In order to overturn morality, progressives are willing to usurp the rightful place of family and religion in moral instruction and formation.

Sec. Clinton is right to want to progress beyond evils and deficiencies of the past, but we think she often mislocates those evils and deficiencies. She is right to emphasize human liberty, but we think she is wrong to so easily discard certain norms (such as gender) that are part of nature's order and are basic to society's health. In sum, we find Sec. Clinton's version of progressivism deeply troubling. It seeks to create a new conception of reality and human existence, a conception that threatens the health of our society by rejecting some of the most basic and self-evident facts about human life.

2. Policy Stances

We concede that it is unlikely any candidate will share *all* of our views regarding public policy. Still, in our assessment of a presidential candidate, we seek fundamental agreement on the most important issues. We wish to support a candidate who is pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-religious liberty. We wish to support a candidate with a record of caring for the poor and marginalized. We wish to support a candidate who shows respect for religious and ethnic minorities. And concerning war, we wish to support a president who is neither a crusader nor an isolationist.

Donald Trump

Perhaps the best place to start is to recognize that Mr. Trump is (severely) underinformed on policy issues. A more forthright way of putting the matter is to say that his policy ignorance is encyclopedic. Rarely does Mr. Trump walk onto a debate stage or cable network news show when he does not know less than everybody else in the room. Even more troubling, he doesn't seem to care.

On core issues of concern to evangelicals, Mr. Trump's campaign has given mixed signals. Consider, for example, abortion. Even in articulating his newfound pro-life stance, he stated that he wouldn't want to accidentally kill a baby who might grow up to be very talented. This rationale is more Darwinian than pro-life. In response, evangelicals wish to ask, "What about other babies in the womb, ones who will never be famous or exceptionally talented? Aren't they valuable also, as persons created in God's image?"

But this is not the only signal that Mr. Trump has no vested interest in the pro-life cause. During the campaign, he argued that his sister, Maryanne Trump Barry—who is a liberal, progressive, pro-choice judge—would make a "phenomenal" Supreme Court justice. Recently, he also affirmed that the Planned Parenthood Foundation of America (PPFA) provides "valuable" services. In response to Mr. Trump, evangelicals would argue that his sister's view of the Constitution and of fetuses would make her a poor choice for the Supreme Court, and that PPFA's "valuable" services are almost always tied to abortive procedures. To Mr. Trump's credit, he provided—in order to assuage the fears of conservatives about his approach to jurisprudence—quite a good list of potential Supreme Court nominees. But we are not persuaded that he can be trusted to defend either human life or the future of the Court.

As for religious liberty, there is not much to say since Mr. Trump has said so little about the issue. He has devoted a great deal of attention to the Second Amendment, but he has said almost nothing about protecting those freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. There is little evidence that Mr. Trump even *understands* the notion of religious liberty. This is of great concern to us as evangelicals, because [religious freedom is presently under attack](#) in America. Directly related to these concerns are Mr. Trump's feelings about the maelstrom concerning gender, sexuality, and marriage in America. Where is Mr. Trump on these issues? He seems, for the most part, disinterested.

On national security, defense, and foreign policy, Mr. Trump has been largely incoherent. He is correct in claiming the intelligence community must focus both on foreign and homegrown terrorists, and that this may require unconventional (but we should add, lawful) means to counter. He is also right about [requiring immigrants to support the Constitution](#). Yet most of his public statements on security and defense are ill-considered and even dangerous. The best example is his contention that [the United States should kill the families of terrorists](#). Sadly, even in his attempt to adhere to Republican orthodoxy on defense and foreign policy, Mr. Trump exposes his lack of knowledge, leading him to provide errant solutions to defense and foreign policy problems.

Mr. Trump's economic policy is also of concern, particularly to those who adhere to a "pro-growth" economic conservatism. (The [Club for Growth](#)—"the pre-eminent institution promoting Republican adherence to a free-market, free-trade, anti-regulation agenda"—campaigns against him.) Mr. Trump's tariff plan would be disastrous for blue-collar workers. He has stated he would [impose a 45% tariff](#) on goods from China (later revised to 25 percent), and he now includes Japan and Mexico in this proposal. Those nations rank first, third, and fourth among our trade partners. Combined, they account for 35 percent of U.S. trade activity. That is approximately \$415 billion of goods that we sell to those countries. And for perspective, this policy would increase the price of goods sold by companies like Walmart (1.4 million U.S.

employees), by nearly 50 percent. The bottom line? Mr. Trump's approach to economic policy would cause significant problems.

Mr. Trump is correct that international trade poses a challenge for economic stability, especially for working class Americans. But [the solution is not protectionism, increased economic isolationism, or more federal intervention in the economy](#). Trade liberalization laws have actually *increased* the average household income by \$7,100 to \$12,900 per year. And contrary to Mr. Trump's claims, [it is estimated](#) that the Trans-Pacific Partnership would further increase American incomes by a total of \$131 billion. Free trade is good for our nation, even if it brings with it serious challenges that we must meet in order to fulfill our obligations to working-class Americans.

Concerning immigration policy, Mr. Trump is best known for promising to "build a wall" (i.e., a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border). On June 16, 2015, standing outside of Trump Tower, Mr. Trump announced his presidential candidacy promising to build a wall in order to keep out the rapists and criminals. And though his policy stance on immigration has changed repeatedly, our best guess is that he still intends to deport all 11.3 million undocumented immigrants. (At least temporarily: he has lately indicated support for a form of "touchback amnesty" in which undocumented immigrants are forced to leave, get a visa, and return within a short timeframe.)

But, [as the Wall Street Journal argued](#), this type of deportation would increase federal spending by \$400 billion. A report by the American Action Forum which evaluated the costs of Trump's plan over a two-year period (assuming that *only* 20 percent of undocumented immigrants would voluntarily leave and pay their own way out), concludes that the federal government would need to hire at least 85,000 additional federal agents, add approximately 350,000 beds to existing detention facilities (ten times the current total), hire 30,000 more federal attorneys, and charter thousands of buses and planes. Additionally, the proposed deportation would reduce the U.S. labor force by more than 6 percent and shrink the economy by nearly the same percentage.

While Mr. Trump's immigration plan may soon evolve again, this outline of his deportation rhetoric provides a glimpse into his basic impulses on the subject. Which brings us to the last policy concern: Trump's policy stances have a half-life shorter than those of any politician in recent memory. Peter Wehner, who previously worked in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush, [argues succinctly](#):

Trump has flipped his view on mass deportation, visas for high-skilled workers, the Iraq War, the Libya intervention, deposing Hosni Mubarak, Syrian refugees, fighting ISIS, NATO, nuclear proliferation, banning all Muslims, abortion, the minimum wage, Obamacare mandates, gun control, taxing the wealthy, releasing his tax returns, his party affiliation, his views on Ronald Reagan (from a "con man" to the president he admires most), Bill Clinton (from his sexual predatory habits being "totally unimportant" to him being "the worst abuser of women in history of politics"), Hillary Clinton (from "probably above and beyond everybody else" as secretary of state to "the worst secretary of state in the history of the United States"), and Barack Obama (from "doing great" as president to being "probably the worst president in the history of our country"). And this is only a partial list.

Hillary Clinton

For evangelicals who are also political conservatives, a quick glance at Sec. Clinton's public policy stances causes the sort of pain that might be comparable to undergoing a lobotomy without anesthesia.

For starters, Sec. Clinton is enthusiastically pro-abortion. Beyond maintaining the status quo, she wishes to advance the pro-abortion agenda. Most disturbing, she advocates abolishing the Hyde amendment, which prohibits federal Medicaid dollars from directly funding abortions (except in the instance of rape, incest or the health of the mother). In response to her aggressively pro-abortion stance, [Palmer Williams put it well](#):

Are we as a society really ready and willing to say that somehow lives born into difficult circumstances are so invaluable that we are willing to use federal tax dollars to incentivize the termination of these lives? Such a step would abandon all reverence for life enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and more than two centuries of public policy.

Sec. Clinton is also weak on religious liberty. She disagrees with the Supreme Court's ruling (*Burwell v Hobby Lobby*) that a corporation has the rights of a person when it comes to religious freedom—a ruling which represented an enormous victory for rights of conscience in America. She argues the state-level Religious Freedom Restoration Acts (RFRAs)—modeled after the RFRA signed by her husband—go beyond protecting religion and intentionally discriminate against LGBT Americans. And as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's [Andrew Walker has shown](#), Sec. Clinton belittles religious liberty regularly and thinks that conservative Christians who hold biblical views about sexual morality are “beneath the threshold of respect.” We serve advance notice: a Clinton presidency will only embolden secular progressives to further restrict religious freedom.

Her views on gender, sexuality, and marriage also cause concern. We as conservative evangelicals want to secure for LGBT citizens, as for all Americans, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Sec. Clinton agrees, but is patently wrong in her view of what this entails. On same-sex marriage, her view [recently evolved](#) (coincidentally, just as public opinion polls tipped in favor of same-sex marriage), and Sec. Clinton is now in favor of redefining the institution of marriage to include same-sex marriages. This is a category error. A same-sex relationship is a relationship between two people who matter to God and to us, but it is not a marriage.

Concerning transgender persons and public facilities, Sec. Clinton applauded the Obama administration's guidance directing public schools to allow transgender students to use restrooms matching their gender identity. A difficult issue to be sure, but again we dissent. As gender dysphoria and transgenderism emerge as major cultural issues, secular progressives are far too inclined to hastily affirm and applaud the rejection of one's God-given sexual identity. The approach of Sec. Clinton and other progressives toward these issues will harm children and families.

On matters of national defense, security, and foreign policy, her legacy is a mixed bag. On the positive side, Sec. Clinton would almost certainly be more aggressive than President Obama against terror networks. This is displayed in her [clearly articulated plan to combat ISIS](#). David Brooks correctly asserts, “While other candidates are content to issue vague calls to get tough on terror, Clinton offered a multilayered but coherent framework, not only dealing with ISIS but also putting that threat within the crosscutting conflicts that are inflaming the Middle East.”

As regards economics, Sec. Clinton’s policies are not conducive to the long-term flourishing of our nation. Her first and strongest impulse is to raise taxes and increase federal spending. Instead of allowing society’s mediating institutions (businesses, churches, families, non-profit organizations) to solve social and cultural problems, she reflexively turns to the federal government for the solution. Ultimately, Sec. Clinton would continue to expand the reach of the federal government until its octopus-like tentacles reach into every sector of American society. Her policies would weaken the “middle layers” of our society by micro-managing mediating institutions and local communities in a fashion that is neither appropriate nor competent.

Finally, concerning immigration, Sec. Clinton is right to allow a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants (although, as Bruce argues in [this book](#), there should be no blanket amnesty), right to emphasize the deportation of immigrants who are criminals, and right to call for an end to the deportation raids targeting those who immigrated to flee violence in Central, Latin, or South American countries.

3. **Wisdom, Character, and Temperament**

Does character matter when it comes to electing the President of the United States of America? Often, the debate is framed in terms of a question: “Are we supposed to be voting for a Pastor-in-Chief or a Commander-in-Chief?” When asked in that manner, the implied answer is, “Of course we are not electing a pastor-in-chief, so stop whining about a presidential candidate’s track record in matters of morality.” But not only is this question simplistic and unhelpful, it is premised upon a false dilemma.

[Of course character matters](#). Do a presidential candidate’s words and actions reveal wisdom and sound judgment? Does the candidate keep promises, or does he have a history of breaking trust with those to whom he is closest? Is the candidate known as a truth-teller, or has she established a pattern of lying to the public? Is this a person of fundamental integrity? We are not seeking a perfect candidate, but there is a threshold of trustworthiness and decency. The best presidential candidates are wise. They have a strong center of gravity, make reasoned judgments, keep the trust of those they are close to, and show concern for moral principles.

Overlapping with character and judgment is a candidate’s governing style. Consider the closely-related questions of authority and strength. We should avoid voting for a candidate who is feckless and weak, easily pushed around by special interest groups, corporations, or leaders of foreign countries. At the same time, we should not support a candidate who is unable to tolerate dissent, unwilling to be challenged, or eager to use government power to silence opponents.

Instead, we seek a candidate who demonstrates a combination of personal humility and professional resolve, who is able to reason and persuade, who surrounds himself or herself with wise and gifted people and is humble enough to receive their counsel, and who is capable of governing with wisdom and strength even in the face of opposition.

whether they are willing to surround themselves with wise and gifted people and listen to their counsel? Do they have the humility to accept such counsel? Or do they appoint lackeys and “yes men” who do only what the president dictates? Who are their counselors and friends?

Donald Trump

To Mr. Trump’s credit, he has shown good judgment in listening to the concerns of many lower- and middle-income citizens. As [Rusty Reno has articulated](#) well, Mr. Trump understands that everyday Americans are financially stressed and culturally dislocated while the elites are doing just fine. The elites want a thinner and more globalized culture, but everyday Americans want a thicker culture that respects their religion, tradition, and ethnic heritage. Everyday Americans wonder if they have any significant role left to play in their own country. Politicians and pundits should pay attention. Instead of mocking or ignoring these Americans, they should try to address the very real problems they are experiencing, such as economic stress, cultural homelessness, and political mistrust. For his part, Mr. Trump has intentionally highlighted these sentiments of displacement and marginalization throughout his campaign.

Unfortunately, his good judgment on this issue is undercut by myriad other aspects of his person. Every human being is a sinner, and no president should be expected to have flawless character. But we are convinced that the deeply ingrained and especially troubling nature of Mr. Trump’s character flaws disqualify him from holding the highest office in the nation.

Mr. Trump has a complicated relationship with truth and reality. His campaign is built on his charisma and personal magnetism, which are formidable (there is a reason that candidates on both sides of the aisle have sought both his money *and* endorsement). But unfortunately, his campaign has been short on substance and has played fast and loose with the truth.

The truth is simply whatever suits Mr. Trump or pleases the audience (remember the [Trump Steaks press conference](#)?). He says whatever comes to mind, whether or not it is true. Recently, Politifact estimated that two percent of his statements are “true,” and only seven percent of them “mostly true.” The rest fall somewhere in the “half true” to “pants on fire lies” range. And while this fits the American moment very well—as professional politics and punditry is transitioning further away from reasoned dialogue and debates and further toward emotive marketing and persuasion—Mr. Trump’s bravado and casual relationship with the truth impede our ability to believe his promises about policy issues.

His demeaning and degrading rhetoric reveals a fundamental disrespect for human dignity. He has been recorded bragging about grabbing the genitals of women who have not given consent, mocked a journalist by imitating that journalist’s physical handicaps, made racist comments about Mexican immigrants, delayed and hedged when asked to distance himself decisively from

white supremacists, called a network anchor a bimbo, compared a fellow presidential candidate to a child molester, mocked a war veteran for not being able to evade capture, ridiculed Republican primary candidates for having a civil demeanor during debate, declared his delight in the fact that he could shoot somebody in the middle of 5th Avenue and still not lose his supporters, and bragged that he doesn't need God's forgiveness for anything at all.

Mr. Trump has established a pattern of self-centeredness that would not serve this country well. To his credit, Mr. Trump does sometimes passionately voice the concerns of some American citizens. But he doesn't give evidence that he wants to serve the American people as a whole. As Christians, we are the first to acknowledge that all people (including the authors of this article) are sinful and flawed. Yet in our estimation, Mr. Trump's variety of self-centeredness would both coarsen and endanger the nation. He appears most comfortable simultaneously bragging about himself and demeaning others (or other races, classes, or sexes).

As [psychologist Dan McAdams](#) noted in June, he and other clinical psychologists over the years have diagnosed Mr. Trump as an extreme narcissist. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner calls Trump "remarkably narcissistic" and clinical psychologist George Simon, known for teaching seminars on manipulative behavior, says Trump, "is so classic that I'm archiving video clips of him to use in workshops because there's no better example ... He's like a dream come true." Pragmatically, Simon writes, narcissism has some positives: it can foster in a leader the ability to be publicly persuasive, initiate legislation, and set big agendas. However, narcissism often leads to unethical behavior ("I'm above the law") and obsessive retaliation against both real and perceived slights. Simon also notes that narcissists often come across as charming and witty during first encounters, but afterwards quickly become annoying or even infuriating.

If the past year and a half is an indication of how his self-centeredness would translate into a governing style, we find very little reason to think that Mr. Trump can bring even a modicum of unity to our fragmented and divided nation. [David Brooks puts it well](#) when he writes, "The Republican Party can't unify around Donald Trump for the same reason it can't unify around a tornado. Trump, by his very essence, undermines cooperation, reciprocity, solidarity, stability or any other component of unity. He is a lone operator, a disloyal diva, who is incapable of horizontal relationships. He has demeaned and humiliated everybody who has tried to be his friend, from Gov. Chris Christie to Speaker Paul Ryan."

Mr. Trump shows clear authoritarian tendencies. The revelation of those tendencies is not limited to his repeated praise for authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin. It extends to his use of government power to silence his critics. During this election cycle, he has threatened legal action against any number of individuals, media outlets, and political groups who have criticized him. In fact, as the newly presumptive nominee, he unleashed Gov. Sarah Palin to threaten to ruin Speaker Ryan's career. Of grave concern to constitutional conservatives, Mr. Trump has not only threatened to restrict freedom of the press, but he has publicly and baselessly questioned the integrity of a sitting judge (in what Speaker Ryan referred to as "[the textbook definition of a racist comment](#)"). These tendencies are nothing less than "[a recipe for a constitutional crisis](#)."

Beyond our borders, we believe his governing style would be divisive globally. Mr. Trump's undisciplined and retaliatory responses to even the smallest slight could prove combustible in

relation to foreign nations and other global actors. [Psychologist Dan McAdams](#) is worth quoting in full:

“I believe there is good reason to fear Trump’s incendiary language regarding America’s enemies....The rhetoric that Trump uses to characterize both his own life story and his attitudes toward America’s foes is certainly aggressive. And, as noted, his extroversion and narcissism suggest a willingness to take big risks—actions that history will remember. Tough talk can sometimes prevent armed conflict, as when a potential adversary steps down in fear. But belligerent language may also incite nationalistic anger among Trump’s supporters, and provoke the rival nations at whom Trump takes aim.”

Even in this assessment, we recognize that Donald Trump is by no means a thoroughly bad person and he should not be demonized. The evidence tells us that he loves his family, frequently listens to and helps people he meets who are in need, and is attentive to the needs of many working class citizens. We have criticized him extensively not because he is thoroughly bad, but because this unique combination of character flaws make Mr. Trump an unacceptable candidate for the highest office of the land. [Yuval Levin summarizes well our concerns](#):

The core problem with Trump (though not the only one of course) has always been a character problem. He is unfit for the presidency by virtue of his lack of virtue, and of his intemperate temperament, thuggish bully instincts, unabashed infidelity to all who rely on his word, and staggering lack of focus, discipline, responsibility, and restraint. These are dangerous traits in a decision maker, and a person manifesting them is unlikely to be improved by being given immense power. As if to prove the point, Trump has spent the past two weeks essentially going mad in public—and in the process recklessly assaulting the legitimacy of our democratic institutions—in response to provocations that involve nowhere near the level of intensity and pressure he would routinely face as president. He has spent this month confirming many of the greatest fears of those intent on keeping him from the presidency.

Hillary Clinton

To her credit, Hillary Clinton is known for her indefatigable work ethic. This has been the case throughout her life—she was the first student to deliver a commencement address at Wellesley College—and her hard work has repeatedly paid off over the course of her career. Sec. Clinton has always been a thorough researcher and clear communicator of policy ideas.

Unfortunately, Sec. Clinton’s positive work ethic is also undercut by myriad other aspects of her personality. Like Mr. Trump, we are convinced that Sec. Clinton’s fundamental character flaws disqualify her from holding the highest office in the nation.

While Sec. Clinton has always been a private person, she is [increasingly guarded](#) in this particular election cycle. She often walls herself off from the press and the public. During the 2008 election cycle, she regularly flew in the same plane with members of the media; now, she often flies separately. No doubt her privacy is related to the fact that the Clintons have been embroiled in [scandal after scandal](#), from their [earliest days](#) in public office (though, with the

exception of President Clinton's impeachment by the House of Representatives, they have always evaded significant repercussions).

The near-constant stream of scandals has irreparably damaged Sec. Clinton's credibility. The public considers her untrustworthy and her approval ratings, although not as low as Mr. Trump's, are epically low. The recent email scandal is but the latest example of why people deem her untrustworthy. Not only did she mishandle classified information, she lied about it repeatedly to the American people.

Concerning these lies, [Jonah Goldberg is worth quoting at length](#):

From the earliest days of this scandal — and it is a scandal — Clinton has lied. Unlike Donald Trump's lies, which he usually vomits up spontaneously like a vesuvian geyser, Clinton's were carefully prepared, typed up, and repeated for all the world to hear over and over again. ... [Sec. Clinton] is marketing herself as the mature and upstanding grown-up. She does nothing spontaneously. And that means all of her lies are premeditated.

In addition to premeditated lies, Sec. Clinton has proven remarkably inconsistent in her identity (how she presents herself) and in her policy positions. Concerning her identity, [we quote Goldberg once again](#):

Clinton has had more costume changes than the cast of 'Cabaret.' In no particular order, she's been a feminist hero who scorned stay-at-home moms (standing by their man 'like Tammy Wynette,' Clinton spat in one interview), a stay-at-home mom herself, a modern-day Eleanor Roosevelt ideologue, a moderate, a centrist, a neocon, a martyred wife standing by her man, a progressive. From her days as first lady of Arkansas through her stint as a carpetbagging senator in New York, she's put on and taken off her maiden name more often than...

Concerning her policy positions, Sec. Clinton has been equally inconsistent. She voted to authorize military force in Iraq. Now it's her "[greatest regret](#)." She was previously opposed to same-sex marriage, but came to support it just as it became [politically advantageous](#) to do so. She supported her husband's signing of the [Religious Freedom Restoration Act](#) in 1993, but now opposes state-level religious freedom bills, once again, following just behind the curve of public opinion. And there is more. She was "[inclined to back](#)" the keystone pipeline. Now she opposes it. She was for the [Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement](#) (she even helped negotiate it!). Now she opposes it. The big question is whether we can name a single major policy issue she hasn't flipped on, or wouldn't flip on, should the political winds shift again.

Also troubling is the fact that Sec. Clinton is out of touch with the average American. This should not be surprising, given that [she hasn't, for example, driven a car in two decades](#) (although, to be fair, this is probably true of any number of career politicians). Even though she touts herself as the candidate who works for the working poor, her speeches and policies lack empathy. And she sometimes appears to be out of touch with her base, [such as with Democratic women](#). Despite these concerns, Sec. Clinton has spent the 2016 election cycle distancing herself even further from both the press and the public.

Finally, Sec. Clinton's rhetoric toward her political opponents is often condescending and inflammatory. Most recently, she made headlines for saying, "you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the 'basket of deplorables' ...The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it." And though Sec. Clinton quickly attempted to walk back these comments, these remarks fit into a broader pattern. The release of (illegally obtained) emails from the account of [her campaign chairman, John Podesta](#) reveals an undeniable disdain which Sec. Clinton and her subordinates share toward various groups, including Catholics and Southerners. In response to this, Speaker Ryan said:

"If anything, these statements reveal the Clinton campaign's hostile attitude toward people of faith in general. ...All Americans of faith should take a long, hard look at this and decide if these are the values we want to be represented in our next president."

4. Ultimate Commitments

When people say there should not be a religious test for office, they are usually defining religion as "the private worship of a supernatural deity." In that case, we would certainly agree: if a candidate's worship is merely private, it is largely irrelevant to public service.

But a person's worship is never merely private, and is not always directed toward a supernatural deity. In fact, human beings are always ascribing ultimacy to things—such as sex, money, power, and success—that are not supernatural deities. When we ascribe ultimacy to something, when it occupies the commanding heights of our hearts, we are worshiping it. And its ultimacy in our lives means that it cannot remain private, but will radiate outward into all that we do.

Therefore, we should consider, to the extent that we are able, a candidate's ultimate commitments, which is essentially his or her religious orientation. More specifically, we should consider two layers of religious commitment.

The first layer of religious commitment concerns a candidate's stated religious beliefs. If a candidate is seriously committed to Christianity, Islam, Scientology or Buddhism, that commitment will surely affect his or her view of the world, of leadership, of policies, and of the "good life" which they seek for the American people.

The second layer of religious commitment concerns a candidate's idols. The Bible teaches that each of us is tempted to make a "god" or a "savior" out of things that are actually not "gods" or "saviors" at all, things such as sex, money, power, success or the approval of others. In other words, a person's "god" is whatever he or she considers ultimate in life, whatever commands his or her allegiance and shapes his or her life most profoundly. Presidential candidates are no different from the rest of us: they give their love, trust, and obedience to idols that will surely affect the way they govern.

When it comes to the question of ultimate commitments, we find it ill-advised to speculate publicly. Instead, we present this criterion to you for consideration and to challenge you to measure these candidates against this framework. We believe that both Sec. Clinton and Mr.

Trump have revealed their ultimate allegiances and in our view, both portend an undesirable future under America's next Chief Executive.

Conclusion

For the reasons stated, we will not vote for either nominee.

Mr. Trump's ethnocentric nationalism is the wrong response to globalism and the wrong response to the frustrations of working-class white voters. His demeaning rhetoric towards those who are different from him will further enflame the burning fires of civil unrest. His unawareness of, and lack of interest in, basic policy issues does not engender confidence that he will govern our nation with care. His penchant for public retaliation gives reason to believe that he would further destabilize our nation's relationship with our allies and further embroil us in conflict with our enemies. His divisive and destabilizing personality could easily lead to a destabilization of the world order and the economy; a Trump presidency could cause a precipitous, and long-lasting, decline in global markets.

Sec. Clinton's presidency would likely track to the left of President Obama's. We would experience the appointment of Supreme Court justices who view the Constitution as a living document. Those judges would no doubt refuse to reverse court decisions—such as *Roe v. Wade*—that are the result of judicial activism. We would experience a continued elevation of “nondiscrimination” rights at the expense of the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion. We would never be able to trust that she is telling our nation the truth, even about matters of grave significance, such as national security. Her rhetoric towards those with whom she disagrees (e.g., “basket of deplorables”) will deepen the divide in our nation. Her “big-government” presidency will hurt the economy seriously over the long term.

Our democracy functions best when voters give thoughtful consideration to each nominee. We have aimed to provide a fair assessment of both Mr. Trump and Sec. Clinton. We believe these four criteria can help American citizens, and especially conservative Christians, ask the right type of questions about each presidential candidate.

American voters should give consideration to these concerns as they enter the voting booth.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why would you not use your vote to help a candidate who has a chance to win the election?

This is a good question. As [Bruce wrote recently](#),

Under the United States' two-party system, people who want their views represented are *usually* better off promoting them within the big tents of the Republican or Democratic parties. Past examples of this strategy include Howard Dean and various Tea Party and Libertarian candidates. Recent examples include Trump and Sanders. By staying within

one of the two big tents, one can build a following and possibly even forge change within the party. Yet, sometimes the benefits are outweighed by the costs.

From one angle we lose our voice by dissociating from a major party. But from another angle we gain our voice by speaking clearly about our long-term vision for American society.

In this case, we think the benefit outweighs the cost.

Aren't you neglecting your ethical responsibility to tilt the election toward the best candidate?

No. The way this question is posed assumes that the two-party system in the United States is a God-given creation mandate. It is not. Neither is it what our Founding Fathers envisioned. Our ethical responsibility does not involve a mandate to vote for whoever is served up by our two major parties. A vote is not only something that is tallied in order to determine the winner in an election; it is also our voice to the nation, registering what we think is best for our nation.

American citizens are voting for a commander-in-chief, not a pastor-in-chief, so why is "character" even a criterion for you?

Everybody believes "character" is a criterion for holding the Presidency of the United States. We don't believe anybody who says they don't take character into account. Would they knowingly vote for a traitor? Would be happy to elect a murderer? Of course not. So the question isn't whether or not character matters. That is too simplistic. The question is whether the candidate has character flaws that are too grave, too deeply established, too dangerous to entrust them with the highest office of the land.

Don't you think it's a little bit self-righteous to criticize another person's character?

It certainly can be. We shouldn't take delight in critically evaluating another person's character. We shouldn't exaggerate their character flaws. We shouldn't examine another person's character without allowing God to point out our own myriad flaws. But when we live in a democratic republic in which we are asked to evaluate candidates for the Presidency, character assessment is part of our role as citizens.

Are you saying you won't vote for a person who is not an Evangelical?

No. Far from it. If there had been an atheistic candidate this year who promised to protect religious liberty, showed concern for the pro-life cause, exhibited genuine concern for working class people, and who gave evidence of wisdom, character, and stable temperament, we would have supported that candidate.

Why did you emphasize the candidate's shortcomings rather than their virtues, and why did you devote (slightly) more space to critiquing Mr. Trump's candidacy than Sec. Clinton's?

Although sometimes an evaluation of presidential nominees would include a fairly equal ledger of “pros” and “cons,” this article devotes more space to the “cons” for these reasons: we view both candidates as unacceptable nominees and are trying to show the uniquely different but equally bad consequences that will flow from the election of each respective nominee. We devoted slightly more space to Mr. Trump’s candidacy because he is the nominee of the political party of which we are members, and of which many or most of our target readers are members.