

We Shouldn't Be This Invested in a Presidential Election

The reality of a Trump-Biden rematch has provoked a torrent of weeping and gnashing of teeth in the mainstream media. One article after another had declared the 2020 redux as the matchup Americans “[don't want](#)” and are “[least excited about](#),” with one pollster [describing](#) it as a “cruel joke.”

All of this consternation highlights one of the unhealthiest aspects of American politics: the sheer importance we place on our chief executives, so much so that every presidential election in recent memory has been labeled “[the most important in our lifetimes](#).”

This, however, is not how our system of government was designed. The president was never supposed to be the center of national life – for good reason.

To be sure, when the Framers drafted the Constitution, they created an “[energetic](#)” president with considerable powers – to sign laws, appoint government officials, and command the military. They did not, however, envision the president as the primary mover in American politics, especially in domestic policymaking. That job belonged to the people and their representatives. As George Washington [noted](#) in 1789, “The election of the different branches of Congress... is the pivot on which turns the first wheel of the government... which communicates motion to all the rest.”

In other words, after the people express their views through elections, the legislative and executive branches then carry out the voters' will. Once the first wheel (the people) moves, the second wheel (Congress) moves in synchronized fashion. The president is the third wheel – as the chief *executive*, he is tasked with *executing* the people's will, namely by enforcing

laws Congress passed.

The Framers did give the president the power to sign or veto legislation, but our earliest chief executives saw this power largely as a constitutional check on the legislature. They often approved bills they personally disagreed with out of respect for Congress, and used the veto when they felt the law violated the letter of the Constitution. As President Washington [explained](#), “From motives of respect to the Legislature (and I might add from my interpretation of the Constitution) I give my Signature to many Bills with which my judgment is at variance.”

Washington’s refreshing deference ensured that laws directly affecting the American people were made in a deliberative process that included as many of their representatives as possible, balancing the interests of the whole country, rather than forcing through policies favored by a single individual. This system had the added benefit of killing most proposed laws – understood to be restrictions on people’s freedom – through congressional gridlock. Of course, there were exceptions, but in early American history, the general rule was a limited chief executive as the servant of the people.

The Progressive Movement (1890s-1910s) destroyed this system. America’s 28th chief executive, Woodrow Wilson, [declared](#), “The President is at liberty... to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limit...” In Wilson’s view, presidents were free to do everything possible to attain their ends, regardless of constitutional restrictions.

Thus arose what became the “Imperial Presidency,” or, as I like to call it, the “Messiah Presidency” – soon, presidents were taking upon themselves the hopes of the entire nation in exchange for political support. President Franklin Roosevelt [called](#) for guaranteeing every American a job, food, and clothing. He even [promised](#) freedom from fear itself! The government would be responsible, among other things, for your

physical and emotional well-being. Utopianists and self-help gurus who fetishized the art of leadership were thrilled. It's no surprise that Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, [admired](#) FDR.

What Wilson started culminated in the election of the ultimate "Messiah President," Barack Obama in 2008, who [declared](#) his desire to "change the nature of our politics" – not to merely execute the laws, but to fundamentally change how political business happens in America.

Along the way, the presidency became a Trojan horse for the utopianist agenda, with its occupant as the chief legislator of the country. After all, presidential candidates ran on platforms promising the moon – [ensuring everyone's physical health](#), [ending poverty](#), [preventing natural disasters](#) – and, if elected, used the weight of their office to cram through legislation, often unconstitutionally through [executive orders](#). Those opposing them became villains standing in the way of heaven on earth. With so much at stake, the nation became [hopelessly divided](#).

[Thousands of laws](#) and [trillions of dollars](#) later, utopianist presidents have largely [failed](#) to achieve their goals. The end of a presidency is more often marked more by [disappointment rather than satisfaction](#). Americans [overwhelmingly](#) feel their country is on the wrong track. The "nature of our politics" has only grown more toxic. Perhaps it's time to admit that politicians make for poor messiahs, and to reexamine the more modest presidency of our Founders.

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