

Primary voters wisely consider character

by *The Detroit News*

Consider it a tribute to the instincts of the American voter that this year's presidential contest, so far, is being driven by character and not lofty promises of new programs and ideas.

Although they're clearly worried about the deteriorating economy and concerned about the lingering war in Iraq, voters this season are measuring the candidates for president by the content of their character, not by the fine print of their white papers.

A Washington Post/ABC News poll out this week finds that 51 percent of the American electorate is motivated by the strength and experience of the candidates competing in the primaries, while 39 percent are moved by the promise of a new direction and ideas.

That speaks to a laudable understanding that when push comes to shove, it's more important that the people trust a president to do the right thing when faced with unpredictable circumstances, rather than someone who spells out in advance and in wonkish detail the nuts and bolts of his or her policies.

That certainly accounts for Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's ability to continue inspiring Democratic voters with a message of hope, as he did again Tuesday in the biggest one-day collection of state primaries, and for Arizona Sen. John McCain's ability to survive brutal attacks from the right wing of the Republican Party.

Character counts, voters are saying. And they're right.

America faces daunting challenges during the next few years as it tries to rebuild international relationships, face down the threat from extremists and revive its economy.

A successful president will need integrity, wisdom, a strong backbone and compassion. Good ideas are important, too, of course.

But a president of unquestionable character has a better chance of rallying the fractured American people to those ideas.

Early on, it looked like voters might be succumbing to populist promises. Now, it's becoming more clear that

what they want is a leader who inspires them and, more important, one they can trust.

That dynamic has the potential of creating an enticing general election this fall and makes it more likely voters will elect a president the entire country can follow, even if they have disagreements on the details of policies and programs.

Reprinted from The Detroit News.

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