At last the election is over. Yet there is no rest for the weary. Not two hours passed before President-elect Obama was being called upon to act. Many demand that he immediately propose reforms to their favorite programs, especially those he supported during the campaign. Yet the most dangerous thing he can do at this point is to jump into making individual, one-off policy decisions, especially before he’s got a full budget picture of how everything adds together—not just for this year, but for the eight years he hopes to be President.

There’s no way around it: President-elect Obama has got to move quickly from campaigning to governing mode. He must map out a journey different from the one he has been on—which first and foremost means deciding how and from whom he gets his information.

Campaign promises do not and never have really pointed the way for a new President. Every programmatic decision he makes early on reverberates back onto what he can do later. If he puts more money into one program, he immediately reduces the amount of money he has available for alternatives. More for tax cuts or health care expansions makes it harder to provide for education and infrastructure, and vice versa. Spending on good programs can be like investments that provide some payback—but they still have to be paid for, and one investment can override ability to make another. Then there’s the most daunting problem of all: fulfilling all the promises of past Congresses severely constrains almost all significant options.

Therefore, while it may not seem very exciting, the most important executive decision facing the President-elect at this point is determining how he is going to gather and use information for his future decision-making.

That information flow starts but does not end with appointments. Unfortunately, that appointment process itself is broken. It has become increasingly political. I am not speaking here merely of the recent immoral, if not illegal, efforts to weed out candidates by asking for whom they voted or about their religious predilections.

When the Presidential appointment process puts excessive emphasis on politics and friendship as qualifications, soon there are thousands of people running around the executive branch clogging up information channels through which needs to flow real substance. The sheer growth in number of appointees over the past few decades has only added to the barriers between the President and those who really execute government policy on the ground.

That some were good legislators or Wall Street executives may indicate something about their general ability, but it doesn’t really tell us very much about whether they’ve got some good ideas about how to make FEMA more effective in battling hurricanes, how better to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars in financial bailouts, or whether some proposed reform of the tax code can be administered by the IRS.

Controlling the appointment process may be even less important than determining smooth information channels and wise people to monitor them. Here the President must be extraordinarily cognizant of the incentives and games going on around him. Competition for access is fierce and never-ending. With his choice of Rep. Rahm Emanuel for chief of staff, the President-elect is signaling that he recognizes as much.

Since Presidents are human, they find themselves drawn to those who bring them good news they want to hear, not the bad news they must hear. A President must not only fight this tendency, but set up formal ways to protect himself against it. President Ford, for instance, insisted on hearing the policy pros and cons before he heard from his political advisors about the political consequences of alternatives. Also, only the President can empower honest brokers who take abuse from all sides.

Many real policy dilemmas pose special challenges, as often no easy answers exist. Indeed, the most controversial issues usually are controversial because they are difficult. Many a staff person—political and career—intuitively understands this and how to thrive by merely sitting back and scoring points. In tough situations, it’s easier to make simple and accurate statements about some political cost of action than to offer steps forward while acknowledging their limitations.

Will the President pass his first and perhaps most important test, one that will impact on almost every other decision he makes? The ultimate measure will be whether we get good government. When and if government fails, it likely can be traced, at least in part, to errors made at this initial stage.