The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush, by Elvin T. Lim

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designed for the moment but not durable influence on future policy: “Historically, no third way has outlasted the president who has articulated it” (p. 108). This may be a good result for the president and arguably for the nation in the short term but frustrating for scholars who seek stable analytical purchase on presidential rhetoric.

References


Reviewed by KEVIN COE

There has been a growing concern in U.S. society of late that reasoned debate and logical argument are on the decline, ousted by demagoguery and mindlessness. Several popular books have decried this trend, with Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason* (2007) and Susan Jacoby’s *The Age of American Unreason* (2008) among the most notable. Elvin Lim’s *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency* brings this general concern squarely into the realm of the U.S. presidency, documenting, explaining, and critiquing the rise of anti-intellectualism from George Washington to George W. Bush. Fittingly, Lim’s work is a font of reason and logic: Its arguments are well crafted, its data are wide-ranging, and its style feels at times almost consciously erudite. It is, to put it simply, about as anti-anti-intellectual as a book can be.

Lim frames his study, in part, as a corrective to a misconception he views as endemic to much of the scholarship on presidential rhetoric. That misconception—represented most clearly by Jeffrey Tulis’s (1987) important work on the “rhetorical presidency”—is that the primary problem with modern presidential rhetoric is that there is too much of it. Presidents are speaking now more than ever, which leads to a host of problems, not least that effective speaking is oftentimes wrongly equated with effective governing. Lim argues, however, that the poor quality of presidential rhetoric, not its excessive quantity, is the underlying issue. As he explains it, “The anti-intellectual presidency, understood as a problem of rhetorical quality, not quantity, is what properly . . . unifies scholarly lamentations about the rhetorical presidency” (p. 9). This declining quality, according to Lim, is due to a purposeful and increasingly prevalent anti-intellectualism in the presidency.

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Lim is careful to note that his study is about anti-intellectualism, not unintelligence. Presidents’ intelligence—their ability to think through complex issues, to grasp nuance—pertains to mental capacity. In contrast, anti-intellectualism is about attitude—a “hostile stance toward the ostensibly complex processes and products of the mind” (p. 22). It is not a lack of intelligence but a distaste for intellect. So that he might track anti-intellectualism in the public communications of presidents, Lim operationalizes the concept as a “rejection of rhetorical or linguistic complexity” and “valorization of linguistic simplicity” (p. 22).

Lim attempts to demonstrate that such anti-intellectualism has risen in the presidency first by examining linguistic simplification and then substantive simplification in presidential communication. Lim’s evidence for the former is quite persuasive. Relying on Flesch Readability scores—a common metric for assessing readability based on average sentence length and average syllables per word—Lim shows that presidents have increasingly simplified their communications. For example, whereas the average State of the Union address of the 18th and 19th centuries had college-level readability, it now has 8th-grade-level readability. A similar pattern is present in inaugural addresses and, at least since the Hoover administration, in the population of presidents’ first-year public communications. Lim also demonstrates that these changes are not merely a reflection of a broader pattern of simplification in all public discourse. Various types of discourse—including, for instance, print stories about presidential campaigns—have not become noticeably more readable in the past 50 years.

Lim’s case for substantive simplification of presidential rhetoric is compelling as well, albeit less so than his case for linguistic simplification. Using a mix of computer-assisted content analysis and qualitative textual analysis, Lim shows that 20th-century presidents have increasingly appealed to “common sense” and sought applause-generating sound bites, have decreased logos-based appeals to causality and knowledge, and have increased emotional appeals to such an extent that Lim feels they have moved from legitimate pathos to unwarranted bathos. On balance, the data support Lim’s conclusion. Still, the careful reader will note that some of the highlighted changes appear too small to be meaningful. Take, for instance, presidents’ reliance on causal reasoning, which Lim measures via a list of words tracked by the General Inquirer computer program. Among the first three presidents analyzed—Hoover, Roosevelt, and Truman—causal reasoning accounted for a little more than 1.3% of their total words. Among the last three presidents analyzed—Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr.—causal reasoning accounted for roughly 1.1% of their total words (see Figure 4.1, p. 55). That such limited changes truly suggest an “attenuation of logos” (p. 56) is far from clear.

Lim supplements his analysis of presidential rhetoric with wonderfully rich interview data from 42 former or current presidential speechwriters, helping to demonstrate a key point about anti-intellectualism in the presidency: Its rise has been intentional. Speechwriters confirm that they, along with presidents, have sought simple rhetoric because of its perceived political benefits. As Lim rightly notes, the deliberateness of these changes makes it impossible that they reflect only “unintentionalism, the product of an unwitting simpleton” (p. 41). The fact that presidents have sought this simplification means they have been actively anti-intellectual. Lim’s inclusion of these interview data is a welcome departure from much of the work on presidential rhetoric, which typically—and, sometimes, problematically—lets the rhetoric itself do all of the talking.

Lim concludes by devoting considerable energy to the normative case against anti-intellectualism. In Lim’s view, rhetorical simplification inevitably degenerates into oversimplification, which limits the depth and value of presidential communication and, by extension, the broader public sphere. As he puts it, anti-intellectualism in the presidency is
a “germ” that must be stamped out. It is easy to share his concern. Still, many readers may take at least some solace in the fact that, at the end of the day, Lim is talking only about presidents’ public utterances, not their private beliefs or behaviors. Even as presidents have simplified their rhetoric, their attitude toward intellect and their reliance on its principles in the less public aspects of governance may persevere. If they do not, or if what Lim has identified is a public symptom of a disease that infects even presidents’ private thoughts and actions, then there is even more cause to sound the alarm.

Taken as a whole, Lim’s book is an impressive contribution to the study of the presidency. By “asking what rhetoric tells us about the presidency rather than what rhetoric can do for the individual president” (p. 13), Lim’s study exemplifies a constructive approach to studying the presidency, one that uses ever-expanding stores of textual data to identify and investigate variation over time. As this line of research continues to grow, Lim’s book will surely serve as a useful model.

References


Reviewed by PAUL R. BREWER

Shortly after winning the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama issued an invitation to one conservative icon and a rebuke to another. First, he invited Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church and one of the most influential conservative evangelicals in the United States, to deliver the invocation at his January 20, 2009, inauguration. Three days after the inauguration, the new president called out the nation’s most prominent conservative political talk radio host, telling GOP leaders “You can’t just listen to Rush Limbaugh and get things done.” Two books, both published before Obama’s inauguration, help to explain his decisions regarding whom to invite and whom to attack. One is David Domke and Kevin Coe’s The God Strategy, which explores how recent presidents have incorporated religious signals into their communication strategies. The other is Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella’s Echo Chamber, which examines the rise of a “conservative

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