

CULTURE, RHETORIC, AND VOTING



CULTURE, RHETORIC, AND VOTING

THE PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION OF 2012

EDITED BY

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In memory of James A. Garfield, Twentieth President of the United States

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Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a conference, “The Presidential Election of 2012,” held at Hiram College on November 16 and 17, 2012, as the dust was just starting to clear from Election Day (Tuesday, November 6). One hundred and thirty-two years earlier, in November 1880, Hiram College had seen one of its very own elevated to the presidency. James A. Garfield—who in 1851 commenced two years as a student at what was then the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, returned to the school in 1856 as an instructor and soon thereafter became its principal, and left the school in 1861 to embark upon a career in the Union Army and in government—became the twentieth president of the United States. Appropriately, the conference participants enjoyed a private tour of the James A. Garfield National Historic Site in nearby Mentor, Ohio—an experience that fueled dinner conversation as nearly forty scholars from the United States and Canada enjoyed the music of a string quartet.

The high quality of the scholarly chapters contained in this volume speaks for itself. The editors are enduringly grateful for the creativity, diligence, and patience that each author brought to his or her contribution. Graduate assistant Charlie Carlee provided valuable editorial assistance in assembling the manuscript. The University of Akron Press has been a steady partner on this project, and we have benefited mightily from the wise counsel and good work of Amy Freels, editorial and design coordinator; Carol Slatter, coordinator of print manufacturing and

digital production; and director Thomas Bacher. However, neither the conference nor the resulting book would have been possible without the superb efforts of several other estimable people. Brittany Jackson was indefatigable in handling a wide range of planning and logistical challenges associated with the conference. Anita Stocz and Mary Landries ensured that there would be suitable lodging for the participants, that the venues for the panel discussions and meals would be appropriate, and that transportation to and from airports and the historic site would be seamless. Todd Arrington, Chief of Interpretation and Education at the James A. Garfield National Historic Site, and his National Park Service colleagues epitomized professionalism and enthusiasm as they shared their knowledge of the Garfield family and the site with the conference attendees. Keynote speakers Shirley Ann Warshaw, Professor of Political Science at Gettysburg College, and Stephen Koff, Washington Bureau Chief of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, offered up insightful analysis of the Obama presidency and Ohio's role in presidential elections, respectively. And the Garfield Institute for Public Leadership provided generous support for the conference, underwriting nearly one-fifth of the conclave's budget.

The conference was a true team effort, so rewarding and productive that we surely will convene another such gathering in the future. Hiram College's new James A. Garfield Center for the Study of the American Presidency, whose mission is to cultivate in students a deep understanding of the institution of the presidency and the individuals who have held the office, is certain to be the locus of that effort. We hope President Garfield would be proud.

Introduction



Chapter 1

Introduction

Douglas M. Brattebo, Hiram College and

Robert J. Pauly, Jr., University of Southern Mississippi–Gulf Coast

When Barack H. Obama was elected in November 2008 and then inaugurated as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January 2009, he broke a significant cultural barrier as the first African American ever to hold that office. In his election campaign in 2008, Obama, then a one-term Illinois senator, was effective in drawing support from voters across a range of cultural, class, ethnic, and age groups in defeating Republican presidential nominee John McCain, a senator from Arizona. However, rather than bring Americans together as he had so confidently promised to do, Obama instead was quickly overcome by a political environment in which divisions grew ever sharper over the course of his first term. The Democratic-Republican divide was punctuated by rhetoric on both sides that often emphasized cultural barriers, whether related to ethnicity, race, religion, socioeconomic status, or, more often, a combination of these factors. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the outcome of the 2012 presidential election—Obama's victory over former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney—was driven largely by the extent to which each side succeeded in crafting the culturally driven rhetorical messages needed to motivate their respective supporters to cast their ballots in the election.

The interconnected roles of cultural factors, campaign rhetoric, and the resultant voter behavior demand thoughtful analysis from a range of academic disciplinary perspectives. The purpose of this volume is to provide precisely that type of analysis through the collaborative efforts of scholars from several academic disciplines and subdisciplines, including history, communication studies, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology. It is divided into three parts that focus, in turn, on the broad range of cultural aspects of the 2012 presidential election, the rhetorical approaches of the Obama and Romney campaigns during the election, and the ways the voters responded, which, of course, determined the ultimate outcome.

Part One consists of four chapters that focus on matters psychological, spiritual, and cultural. William D. Pederson explores the role of the outsider in American politics and argues that Obama and the other presidents with whom he identifies are outsiders, psychologically, who resolved their outsider origins positively by using the political arena as the domain in which to self-actualize by working on public policy issues. Pederson classifies these presidents as having in common a “rational democrat” leadership style, which often confounds critics because such presidents build on a rationalist legacy modeled by their heroes rather than offering extremist solutions. Max J. Skidmore examines the political philosophy of Roger Williams (1603–1683), who was English, an Anglican clergyman, a Puritan, and the founder of Rhode Island (where he also founded America’s first Baptist church). Skidmore contends that the devout Williams, who was his age’s most fervent opponent of coercion of conscience and also the figure who laid the groundwork for the traditional American principle of church and state separation, would be appalled at much of 2012’s political rhetoric, particularly churches’ explicit endorsement of purely political initiatives and the setting aside of theological and doctrinal concerns for brazen calculations of worldly self-interest. Luke Perry analyzes Mitt Romney’s faith as a unique factor in the 2012 presidential election by examining public perceptions regarding the prospect of a Mormon president and related political dynamics, including the historical record of discrimination against Mormons, comparisons to John F. Kennedy’s 1960 presidential campaign, the role of evangelical voters in the Republican Party, and the notable barriers to a

Mormon becoming president. Perry concludes that discomfort with Mormonism limited Romney's ability to utilize his faith as a means to connect with potential voters. Wrapping up the first section, Graham Dodds looks at the state of cultural politics and the "culture wars" in the 2012 presidential election cycle. Dodds reviews the history of the topic, considers the impact of four issue areas with a cultural valence (religion and the role of evangelicals, gender and women's issues, gay rights, and aspects of economic and tax policy), and suggests how we might best make sense of the culture wars right now.

Part Two offers four chapters that examine the rhetoric of the 2012 presidential election. Justin S. Vaughn undertakes an analysis of the two major parties' national conventions and contends that such spectacles have become part and parcel of the "postrhetorical" presidency in their deployment of distractions, lack of policy substance, and dishonest manipulation of information. Vaughn catalogs the normative consequences of this development and suggests a path for scholars who wish to research it in the future. Matthew R. Miles looks at the economic policy positions and rhetorical appeals of the two presidential campaigns to see whether the top priority was to attract independent voters or mobilize their core constituencies. Using a national survey experiment, Miles finds strong support for the base-mobilization thesis, which sometimes can convert partisan-leaners into stronger partisans and help to build a postelection policy coalition. Douglas Mock examines the three presidential debates of 2012 and finds, consistent with a great deal of research on presidential debates from 1960 to the present, a plethora of negative features that serve democracy poorly. Because attempts at witty one-liners, incessant squabbling over procedural matters, media coverage focusing on perceived "knock-out punches," and moderators inserting themselves into the proceedings and becoming the story were all prominent in the 2012 presidential debates, Mock proposes fundamental format changes for future election years. To round out this section, Casey Malone Maugh creates a rhetorical roadmap of President Obama's discourse on gay rights by analyzing his speeches and public comments on gay marriage. Maugh finds that Obama's decision to support gay marriage after years of opposition sheltered the president from the common flip-flopping narrative frequently exploited in modern-day politics, and

it also strategically aligned Obama with disenfranchised left-leaning voters and young voters, reinvigorating their sense of Obama as a candidate for reelection.

Part Three is made up of three chapters that look at voting behavior in 2012. Using survey research, Lisa Hager examines the tactic, widely used by both 2012 presidential campaigns, of promoting early voting to boost turnout and stockpile votes before Election Day. Hager finds that older voters, more politically engaged voters, and voters living in states that do not require justification to vote early are more likely to do so, suggesting that less restrictive early voting laws and voters' ages matter more in the pre-Election Day turnout competition than the campaigns' strategies. Will Miller and Sean Foreman note that, as much as Obama ran a superior campaign in 2008, changing demographics played an equally important role, particularly the long-term decline in the percentage of white voters in the electorate. Miller and Foreman examine the 2012 presidential campaigns' efforts to court women, Hispanics, Catholics, young voters, and seniors as some of the key constituencies on the road to the White House to identify the most significant voting blocs in swing states that determined the outcome of Obama vs. Romney. Mark D. Brewer and Richard J. Powell examine the group-based appeals of the Obama and Romney campaigns, particularly those made to Democratic and Republican core constituencies, as well as to uncommitted voters. Brewer and Powell find that Romney tended to use broad economic appeals tailored to specific group concerns and delivered by surrogates identified with those groups, while Obama tended to utilize more conventional group appeals rooted in specific policy initiatives.

I. Psychology, Religion, and Culture



Chapter 2

Understanding Barack Obama's Leadership

Gamble of the "Rational Democrat"

William D. Pederson, Louisiana State University–Shreveport

America's forty-fourth president remains a puzzle to much of the public, and he still confounds many pundits and even political scientists. Extreme conservatives went out of their way to undermine his presidency during his first presidential term, as well as during his reelection campaign. Liberals have often been put off by Barack Obama's apparent aloofness from some of their favorite causes and his seemingly endless efforts to seek bipartisan compromise with those determined to defeat him. Yet he was reelected and his two successive popular-vote majorities puts him in the exclusive company of the only other Democrats, Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt, to accomplish this feat in American history. Moreover, the Gallup polls have found him the "most admired" man in the world for the fifth consecutive year, and he was selected as *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" in 2012. The purpose of this chapter is to consider Obama's leadership in relation to other presidents who have demonstrated a similar style.

To accomplish this, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section suggests that Obama most closely identifies with America's sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, not only because Lincoln is celebrated as the nation's greatest president but also because both are psychological outsiders in American politics. It is not only that Obama does this but that other presidents have done the same thing for essentially similar reasons. The second part of the chapter suggests that these presidents successfully resolve their "outsiderness" by going into politics. Several have used the Great Emancipator as a model to emancipate themselves from their outsiderness by self-actualizing through the arena of politics. They become policy wonks who help resolve public policy issues, whether borne of slavery and secession, the Great Depression and World War II, or a paucity of health care insurance and looming regional genocide. The third part of the argument is that these self-actualizers most closely fit into a "rational democrat" leadership style both at home and abroad. The Mount Rushmore presidents generally and Franklin D. Roosevelt specifically, as well as a variety of political leaders abroad, build on one another's legacies since they identify with them. Critics often fail to understand their leadership style since it is seldom extremist. The final section of the chapter offers tentative conclusions on Obama's future based on those who have practiced this leadership style in the past. The "rational democrats" enjoy politics so much they are willing to seek reelection despite facing heavy criticism. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt are perhaps the best example of this.

THE OUTSIDER PHENOMENON

It is not unusual for politicians to identify with earlier successful ones. Seemingly success might breed success. Yet frequently overlooked in this process is that it often has deeper psychological roots. As a Republican, Theodore Roosevelt naturally identified with Abraham Lincoln as the party's first successful presidential candidate. Yet TR was both a physical and social outsider—he suffered terrible problems with asthma as a youth, and he had a Confederate mother and a Yankee father who did not join the Union army. The young TR never seemed to understand that his father had stayed out of the Civil War in order to keep peace with his spouse. Similarly, Lincoln, himself Southern born, identified with George

Washington so much that he served two brief stints with the Illinois militia, and then he identified later with Henry Clay, “The Great Compromiser,” who is typically ranked as America’s best legislator (Porter 1987). Lincoln may be the presidency’s prototype outsider: physically, he was too skinny, too tall, and perhaps too ugly; socially, he was born in the South but grew up on the frontier, becoming a hick lawyer; and intellectually, he had less than a year of formal schooling.

Franklin D. Roosevelt conveniently patterned his life after that of his distant uncle, serving in many of the same political positions. Though seemingly not an outsider, FDR never forgot his social rejection during his years at Harvard University, and after polio struck, FDR modeled his recovery on how his one-time “99-pound weakling uncle” had transformed his body. TR’s identification with Lincoln allowed FDR to effectively co-opt Lincoln into the Democratic Party (Rietveld 2003). FDR became the Great Emancipator intent on averting the Nazis’ intended worldwide concentration camp system, while Aaron Copland set America’s war effort to music in the “Lincoln Suite” in 1942.

Post–World War II outsider presidents have followed a similar path. Harry Truman, an almost accidental president, suffered from poor eyesight growing up in Missouri but his service in World War I transformed the young captain. As a student of history without a college degree, he considered Lincoln a great president despite his Confederate mother-in-law. As a New Dealer he built on that immediate legacy by integrating the armed services and pursued a containment policy toward Communism as Lincoln had initially advocated against slavery. Gerald Ford learned belatedly as a teenager that he had been adopted. After college he gave up seeking approval through sports by instead earning a law degree as a means to enter politics. Though a Republican, he helped to restore Truman by putting his bust in the Oval Office. Until the Obama presidency, Bill Clinton was perhaps the best recent example of a regional outsider in American politics who publicly identified with Lincoln on his way to the White House. As the oldest son of a thrice-married Southern mother, Clinton was overweight and a band member in secondary school. He obtained a law degree like the Great Emancipator and hung Lincoln’s portrait in the governor’s office in Little Rock, Arkansas. Clinton is sometimes referred to as America’s first “black” president, as he knew how to preach in different settings.

Yet America's first biracial rather than strictly "African American" president, Barack Hussein Obama, may be the best example of the largely forgotten role of the outsider in the American presidency. His running for president during the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth distracted public attention from a deeper story. Though his campaign in 2008 repeatedly emphasized the obvious link between him and the Great Emancipator (Alter 2010), Obama's identification with Lincoln likely runs deeper than that of any previous president. Obama knows Lincoln's story in terms of both his words and deeds. They are both classic outsiders.

The son of a white American mother from Kansas and an absent African father, his very name—Barack Hussein Obama—accentuates his outsidership. Being born and reared outside the continental United States reinforced his apartness, and Obama even spent time in Indonesia as a youth. Similarly, Lincoln was born in a border state where he spent his first six years before moving to Indiana where he was reared through his teenage years. Like Obama, Lincoln "lost" one parent but had an "angel mother," in the form of a stepmother, who compensated for his loss much as Obama's maternal grandmother filled in for his father and often his own mother. Obama's intrepid maternal grandmother provided her grandson with the model of the Great Emancipator. She had learned it from a high school teacher in Kansas who was steeped in the Lincoln legend (Maraniss 2012). Lincoln would declare his independence from his father by traveling down the Mississippi twice to New Orleans, the largest port city in the Old South, and Obama would come to the mainland for his higher education and eventually establish roots in the "Land of Lincoln" where he married an African American and Lincoln had married an ambitious Southern belle. Both Lincoln and Obama were outsiders on the make.

The major difference between Obama's and Lincoln's backgrounds is seemingly in their educational experience. Lincoln only had a total of one year of formal schooling, so he was forced to become an autodidact in terms of developing into a lawyer. In contrast, Obama was intensively educated through attending an elitist prep school in Hawaii and later Harvard Law School. Yet even in terms of their extreme educational difference they are psychologically similar in Lincoln's lack of education and Obama's "overeducation." From opposite directions they became

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