

Debunking the elite's a tried and true strategy

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 17, 2008

News Analysis

The conservative populism Republican strategists are drawing upon to extol the "ordinary" virtues of Sarah Palin while casting doubts on the "elitist" education of Barack Obama date back nearly two centuries in U.S. history, and have been exploited by generations of politicians.

This is the view of several U.S. historians interviewed this week by *NCR* who easily tie the current presidential campaigns with a populism common during the presidency of Andrew Jackson.

This conservative populism, repeatedly manipulated for political purposes over the years, distrusts the college educated of the East Coast. It manifested itself in the form of an explicit anti-intellectualism during the 1950s, when political strategists painted the articulate presidential candidate, Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, as an "egghead," and out of touch with the ordinary voter.

President Richard Nixon, these historians say, played on this conservative populist mistrust successfully during the divided late 1960s and early 1970s. It was a time when Nixon repeatedly praised the values of "Middle America" while slamming "liberal elites" for bringing down the nation.

More recently these same divisive politics, nested in populist fear and a growing conflict between secular and religious beliefs, was used to their advantage by the Republican Party.

Conservative politicians, playing on these fears and perceived divisions, attempted to portray Al Gore, the 2000 presidential candidate, as being too knowledgeable to be trusted and John Kerry, the 2004 presidential candidate, as looking "too French."

In each instance, this populist sentiment was used by politicians to argue that knowledge or experience mattered little or nothing, or worse, completely separated him from the people he would otherwise lead. On the other hand, Republican strategists played into this populist, anti-intellectualism, portraying George W. Bush as the "ordinary" candidate, and therefore, the one better fit to emerge from within to lead the nation.

"Populism in America is nearly as old as the republic itself," said Michael Kazin, an American history professor at Georgetown University. "Since President Andrew Jackson's epic battle to shut down the 'money power' symbolized by the Second Bank of the United States in 1833, politicians and citizen-activists have voiced their outrage about 'elites' who ignored, corrupted or betrayed the common people."

"Right-wing populists typically drum up resentments based on differences of religion and cultural style," he said. "Their progressive counterparts focus on economic grievances. But the common language is promiscuous - useful to anyone who asserts that virtue resides in ordinary people."

Kazin said this conservative populism has been especially fruitful for Republicans, including Nixon, Ronald

Reagan, who damned a tax policy that took "from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned," and George W. Bush, who mocked "liberal elites" for being soft on terrorism and warm towards gay marriage.

David Hollinger, professor of U.S. history at UC Berkeley, said he sees old forms of populist anti-elitism at play in the current presidential election.

"Being better than others is just fine if the activity is football, swimming, showing bravery in military combat, playing the piano, and even making a lot of money in business," he said. "In all of these activities, being part of an elite is just fine. But if the activity is performing an analysis of an issue in public policy, being really good at it is a problem. In that context, learning and analytic acumen are suspect."

Hollinger said that Nixon was the first to use this strategy in recent history and "Republicans have been using it off and on ever since."

"The idea is to downplay issues having to do with what government does and does not do, and to play up identity, that is, to play up the idea that what you want in a president is someone who is a cultural mirror of one's self. This is, in effect, to take the politics out of politics, and to insert, instead, culture."

Hollinger said Palin's candidacy fits this model. Republicans, he said, are playing to anti-elitist feelings. Voting for Palin, he added, is an explicit way to address fears and resentments for a class of "liberal elites."

Richard Wightman Fox, a U.S. historian at the University of Southern California, sees another form of centuries' old U.S. anti-intellectualism in modern politics. It arises, he said, from a "long-standing American preference for practicality over theorizing."

"In the early 19th century, young boys like Abraham Lincoln were mocked by their fathers if they preferred reading or poetry to hand labor. Lincoln earned the right to read and to write poetry only by out-wrestling his peers," Fox said.

Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, he went on, derided "pointy-headed intellectuals long before the religious right brought the Bible to bear in national politics, setting it off against science and reason."

There was a time, however, when secularism and religion faith went hand in hand.

"It's crucial to remember that liberalism was "religious" as well as "secular" up to the Scopes Trial of the 1920s, Fox said. "At Scopes, William Jennings Bryan opposed "science" because by discrediting "religion" it threatened to create a world where the gospel command to protect the poor would be forgotten."

"But Clarence Darrow and H. L. Mencken ridiculed Bryan for his literal reading of the Bible," Fox said. "And in effect liberalism from then on declared its independence from religion."

Said Fox: "To me the Catholic tradition is crucial as an antidote to what's become of liberalism, since Catholics have no trouble keeping reason and faith side by side. Protestants and secularists are much more likely to see reason as a threat to faith and faith as a threat to reason."

But why have populist and sometimes anti-reason politics played well in America?

Kazin answers this question, saying it "has to do with the anxieties of a racially divided consumer culture" and "the absence of a social movement grounded in the workplace."

After World War II, most Americans considered themselves middle class, he said. "But that identity obscured differences between a minority of "cosmopolitan" Americans who could afford a four-year college and who

lived in cities with large non-white populations, and those who did not.

The cultural conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s added in resentments between these two groups over sexuality, religious faith and affirmative action, allowing politicians to play on these divisions.

Historic populist notions and fears and the political manipulation of these sentiments are once again quite visible in the current presidential race, these historians agree.

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