

Breaking Through the Noise: Presidential Leadership, Public Opinion, and the News Media.

By Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha and Jeffrey S. Peake. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 264p. \$85.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S153759271400036X

— Daniel E. Bergan, *Michigan State University*

While there is some debate about the details, most recent research holds that mass media have minimal effects on attitudes and behavior. Even the president, the most recognizable and the most covered political figure in the American political landscape, fails to measurably influence public opinion. Recent research, most notably George Edwards' work, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (2006), shows that presidents are most often unsuccessful in influencing the public's policy attitudes.

Yet, presidents continue to go public. Why do presidents persist in addressing the public when their efforts do not influence support for their favored policies? Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha and Jeffrey S. Peake set out to resolve this puzzle. The authors propose that, instead of influencing the public's policy attitudes, presidents influence the public agenda, the issues that the public considers important. These efforts to influence the public agenda occur indirectly through the media, which may or may not choose to cover presidential speeches, and therefore can determine how successful the president is in influencing the public agenda. Moreover, presidents communicate with the public not only to influence the public agenda, but also to respond to public concerns.

What emerges is a nuanced theory about presidential communication. The key prediction is the *salience hypothesis*: "...when an issue is of little concern to the public or news media, the president is in a strong position to lead the agenda. On the other hand, if an issue is already of high public concern or heavily covered by the news media, then the president is likely to be responsive to the public or media" (pp. 66-67). The authors complicate the picture by considering, with the *indirect leadership hypothesis*, the intervening role of the media, which may enhance or inhibit presidential attempts to influence the public agenda.

The authors' most novel contribution is their identification of three presidential communication strategies. The three strategies consist of a focused strategy (a nationally televised speech about an issue), a sustained strategy (consistent presidential attention to a given issue), and a more recently employed strategy of "going local" (an appeal to favorable localities in order to gain media coverage and directly appeal to local publics, as when President George W. Bush campaigned for Social Security reform in areas inclined to support the proposal) (pp. 77 – 78).

The three empirical chapters of the book deal with each of the three presidential strategies. The authors use a variety of time series analyses (for the focused strategy and

the sustained strategy) and case studies (for going local) to explore each of the three presidential communication strategies. The chapters each examine the relationship between presidential speeches, the public's ratings of the "most important problem" facing the nation, and media coverage of the president, along with a host of other conditioning variables, such as presidential popularity, real world events, and other factors. The key results of the empirical chapter on a focused strategy fall in support of the salience hypothesis—that presidents use speeches both to influence the public agenda (when salience is low) and to respond to public concerns (when salience is high). Also, the authors provide evidence that presidents influence media coverage, which in turn influences the public agenda. The results for the chapter on sustained presidential attention are harder to characterize as the authors explore multiple issues, although again there is some evidence of presidential influence on the public agenda. Finally, the empirical chapter on going local provides evidence from three case studies, which the authors cautiously interpret as indicating that presidential efforts to go local do in fact influence the public agenda as well as local and national media coverage.

In moving from a relatively parsimonious set of results from prior work on the failure of presidents to influence public attitudes, the authors have developed a much more complicated theory about presidential communication. This complexity raises a couple of concerns about the book. First, the authors have set out to untangle a complex web of relationships between presidential leadership, media coverage, and the public, along with a host of other variables. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake could do more to assuage concerns about their efforts to estimate simultaneous relationships between these variables. Each of the statistical models are introduced briefly, and interested readers will have to consult other work, including the authors' other publications, for technical details. For example, the discussion of instrumental variables used in the analysis of the focused strategy is dealt with briefly in a few sentences (pp. 100- 101). Nonetheless, the authors are forthcoming with potential drawbacks to their approach and are cautious in interpreting the results.

Second, reading the authors' complex theoretical and empirical work made me curious about the potential of evidence gleaned from some simpler relationships. For example, if, as the authors say, there has been little research on sustained presidential focus on a single issue (p. 122), perhaps it would be worthwhile to explore instances of sustained strategy in a relatively straightforward manner—before exploring more complex relationships, including the role of the media and reciprocal relationships between the public and media agendas and presidential communication.

But ultimately, the study of media effects, even when dealing with the president, is the quest for effects that are

small, indirect, and conditional. Presidential power, according to Richard Neustadt's classic work on the presidency, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (1991), is the power to persuade. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake do much to add to our understanding of this power in influencing the public agenda, and raise a number of challenging questions in the process.

Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care? By Neil Gross. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2013. 393p. \$35.00 hardcover. doi:10.1017/S1537592714000371

— Donald A. Downs, *University of Wisconsin*

The vibrant national debate over the extent of liberal bias on campus has been raging for several decades. Many critics on the right depict higher education as a “liberal echo chamber” (p. 120) that has fostered such evils as the repression of academic freedom, the brainwashing of students, and discriminatory conduct. Many critics on the left counter that conservatives seriously exaggerate the problem for their own political reasons.

Few scholars have addressed fundamental questions in this culture war with the tools of empirical social science. Enter Neil Gross with *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* The book is the product of “seven years of intensive social scientific research” (p. 5), much of which Gross and his collaborators have previously presented in leading social science journals.

Why Are Professors Liberal? may leave some key questions dangling, but that being said, it is a sort of *tour de force* of social scientific inquiry. Even skeptics must acknowledge the breadth and fairness of Gross's research and his efforts to honor the Weberian researcher's obligation to keep one's facts separate from one's values. (Gross confesses to being a political liberal, but he succeeds in holding his politics in abeyance.) Gross also scrupulously recognizes the provisional nature of many of his conclusions. Another sign of the book's integrity is that its conclusions will no doubt unsettle both sides of the partisan divide.

Though Gross carefully dissects many social science theories, his book boils down to the pursuit of four questions: Is the professoriate decidedly liberal-left in its composition? If so, why is this the case? Why do conservatives care? (I would further ask why we, the people, should care. See below.) And what *impact* does any discernible liberal bias have on how professors teach, construe their professional obligations, and behave toward their colleagues?

Regarding the second question, Gross proposes in Chapters 6 and 7 that conservatives have targeted academia as a convenient way to discredit liberalism in general. This thesis is interesting, provocative, and plausible in respect to at least some activists, but this section of the

book seems more speculative in terms of evidence than the parts devoted to the other questions.

To answer the other questions, Gross conducts several empirical inquiries, including a survey of the general public's perceptions of liberal bias in academia; a random survey of the political and social views of 1400 academics; free-form interviews with 57 professors who teach in five different disciplines; analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS), which has surveyed large numbers of academics and non-academics since 1970; examination of a leading longitudinal study of adolescents who went on to graduate school for a Ph.D.; and an email “audit survey” of directors of graduate programs in five disciplines. Gross then complements this veritable empirical armada by considering how well the data fit leading social science theories that attempt to explain the politics of academia.

Like previous researchers, Gross finds academia to be decidedly liberal-left, especially compared to the general public, which is center-right. Indeed, academia is more liberal than any other occupational group, with the possible exception of authors and journalists. But professors, as a group, are not monolithic. Moving left to right across the different types of academic institutions, one finds: 9% “radical left;” 31% “progressive;” 14% “center-left;” 19% “moderate;” 4% “economic conservative;” and 23% “strong conservative.” Not surprisingly, the proportions differ depending upon the type of institution and discipline. For example, liberal arts schools are more radical, while community colleges and non-Ph.D. granting universities are more moderate. Humanities and the social sciences tilt decidedly left, with the exception of economics. Engineering and business are more conservative and moderate.

The key question for Gross is *why* academia leans so left. Is this situation due to invidious intent or more sanguine causes? Using the GSS as a compass, Gross finds the leading conventional explanations for liberal tilt to be implausible or only partially valid. Such explanations vary in their quality, from Bordieu's class-position theory of academic politics (sophisticated) to leftists who claim that conservatives are more materialistic or just not typically smart enough to hack it as academics (unsophisticated). Other intriguing theories also fall short of the prize. When all the smoke clears, the main reason there are more lefties than righties in academia is “self-selection.”

The longitudinal study indicates that the “single most important statistical factor” accounting for the political gap between professors and society is who decides to go to graduate school (p. 105). What influences this decision? “Historical contingency” in the modern university's early twentieth-century development led to academia being politically “typed” as liberal-progressive (p. 140). “Political typing” is similar to “sex typing,” in which certain jobs become associated with a specific gender. In both cases, typing reflects an original more or less objective reality