



Insight

Nerd is Another Word for Smart

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There has been a boomlet recently for nerdy Republicans.

David Paul Kuhn, in Real Clear Politics, theorized, “in this era of the professorial president, Republicans decided to put forward their wonkish rock stars,” such as Paul Ryan and Mitch Daniels.

Ross Douthat of The New York Times called Indiana’s Daniels “America’s best governor” even though he’s “a balding, wonky Midwesterner who reminds voters of their accountant.”

Some remain skeptical, but acknowledge a zeitgeist shift in the idea that Republicans can be smart, too. Wonkette noted, “Ryan has been considered the smartest Republican in world history” after his televised exchanges with President Barack Obama on health care.

Even with nerd baggage, developing the reputation for having smart leaders is a positive step for the GOP.

Republicans have long been viewed as those who get gentleman’s “C” in the national classroom. In fact, it is almost a liberal trope to call Republican presidents “dumb.”

Eisenhower, Ford, Reagan and both Bushes (the latter more than the former) got this critique. Nixon was spared — but only because it so clearly did not fit his image as a Machiavellian manipulator.

Democrats, in contrast, are usually cited as the smart ones in American politics. Adlai Stevenson was considered the egghead candidate — columnist Joseph Alsop coined the word in his honor. But Stevenson rarely cracked a book.

John F. Kennedy famously appealed to and cavorted with intellectuals, though he probably

did not write his book “Profiles in Courage,” and his tastes in reading tended toward spy novels. Bill Clinton, of course, was seen as a political and policy savant, and our current president is often designated as Professor Obama.

But this simplistic analysis of smart Democrats contrasted with dumb Republicans does not fit reality.

It is certainly possible to have a debate about the intellectual merits of each man mentioned above. But this recurring characterization of nearly all Republicans as “dumb” diminishes its potency and exposes its partisanship.

It is unlikely that almost every presidential nominee from one political party would be of below average intelligence. In addition, posthumous documentation in at least two cases — Eisenhower and Reagan — reveals that they had far more on the ball than many critics thought at the time.

Indeed, a whole school of Eisenhower revisionist historians demonstrated that his dull manner belied a sharp, behind-the-scenes leader. With Reagan, compilations of his original writings have managed to “lift the dunce cap” from Reagan’s head, as the Chicago Sun-Times described it.

George W. Bush, in particular, suffered from this supposition. Before his extensive reading lists became public, the assumption was that he did not read at all.

Dan Gross described Bush in 2000 as “a graduate of Yale who doesn’t read books,” though anyone who met Bush knew otherwise. As Karl Rove wrote, “in the 35 years I’ve known George W. Bush, he’s always had a book nearby.” Rove later noted that Bush “was a history major at Yale and graduated from Harvard Business School. You don’t make it through either unless you are a reader.”

So, if prominent political analysts want to call prospective Republican presidential candidates nerds, this is a positive step for the party — even if the designations are misleading.

Ryan is tall and youthful looking, with no mannerisms of a nerd beyond a relentless intelligence. He went to Miami University of Ohio, not known as a nerd school, and was in a non-nerd fraternity — Delta Tau Delta.

Mitch Daniels, for his part, did go to Princeton. But he is funny, a work-out fanatic and owns two Harleys. He even has a cool nickname — “the Blade” — from his budget cutting proclivities as director of Office of Management and Budget.

Politicians such as Ryan and Daniels may not be true nerds, but they are smart. And the nerd designation could inoculate them from coming down with a mysterious IQ loss should either run for president.