Kuehl 2012 SCJ published article on the rhetorical presidency and education reform.pdf

Rebecca A. Kuehl, South Dakota State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rebecca-kuehl/8/
Southern Communication Journal
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsjc20

The Rhetorical Presidency and “Accountability” in Education Reform: Comparing the Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush
Rebecca A. Kuehl
Version of record first published: 10 Aug 2012


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
The Rhetorical Presidency and “Accountability” in Education Reform: Comparing the Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush

Rebecca A. Kuehl

To assess how presidential rhetoric shapes public policy over time, this essay analyzes the rhetorical frame of accountability and its role in the current education policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The essay compares the presidential rhetoric of two U.S. presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, because President Reagan’s rhetoric about the standards movement set the stage for the current education policy of NCLB and President Bush’s rhetoric of accountability with federal funds. The article concludes that an emphasis on individual accountability and personal responsibility continues to shape education reform and public policy across partisan lines, even with President Obama’s administration. Such rhetoric prevents education reform that focuses on increasing equality for students in the United States. The article suggests rhetorical framing recommendations for the Obama administration and future presidents.

The year 2012 marks the 10-year anniversary of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Congress passed NCLB in May 2001, and President George W. Bush signed the act into law in January 2002. The policy is punitive, disciplining schools that fail to achieve adequate yearly progress towards increasing students’ test scores by

Rebecca A. Kuehl, Department of Communication Studies and Theatre, South Dakota State University. The author thanks Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Bethany Keeley-Jonker, Marita Gronnvoll, Jamie Landau, Anthony Nadler, Amy Snow Landa, Paul Achter, Karla Hunter, Jake Jantzer, and Nick Benesh for reading various drafts of this essay, and the anonymous reviewers whose recommendations improved the quality of the essay. Correspondence to: Rebecca A. Kuehl, South Dakota State University, Department of Communication Studies and Theatre, CST Box 2218, Brookings, SD 57007. E-mail: rebecca.kuehl@sdstate.edu

ISSN 1041-794X (print)/1930-3203 (online)
© 2012 Southern States Communication Association. DOI: 10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926
reducing or eliminating federal funding. NCLB has shaped not only what students learn but also how they learn. Beasley (2010a) suggests that communication educators need to focus on this policy more than ever before, because NCLB directly affects how we teach students to learn, to write, and to think critically. Although NCLB has not directly addressed postsecondary education, McCroskey (2007) notes that “more and more colleges and universities have begun to apply these concepts [from NCLB] in higher education” (p. 509). Therefore, all educators—even those in higher education—are increasingly facing the constraints and mandates of education reform through NCLB.

Sullivan (1993) points out that the current “telos of education is expertise rather than virtue” (p. 82). Presidential rhetoric is one reason for this shift to professional knowledge, especially when presidents have articulated students as economic resources who are to be held accountable for their own education, regardless of socioeconomic differences (Obama, 2009). In a study of Reagan’s presidential commission on the status of education in the United States, McIntush (2000) argues that the report A Nation at Risk “generated a new discourse on education reform and structured the debates for years to come” (p. 421). This essay extends McIntush’s findings that A Nation at Risk shifted the goals of education away from equality to seeing students as individual competitors in an economy. This study analyzes how presidents were able to articulate this shift from equality to personal responsibility. Instead of discussing how to improve education for students through addressing key causes of educational inequality, such as unequal funding of education through property taxes or segregation in schools, I build upon McIntush’s claim by arguing that presidential rhetoric about NCLB has shaped education policy with the rhetorical frame of accountability. Such a frame avoids a discussion of societal or cultural causes of inequality by focusing the debate on the value of personal responsibility of both teachers and students. Both Republican and Democratic presidents since Reagan have consistently used accountability as a rhetorical frame for education reform, defining it in terms of outcomes from standardized tests (Clinton 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Obama, 2009).

Many studies of presidential rhetoric provide excellent analyses of case studies of specific speeches, or assessments of specific presidents, especially in this journal (Dorsey, 1996; German, 1995; Goldzwig & Dionisopoulos, 1995; Houck, 1997; Howell, 2003; Kiewe, 2004; Lee, 1995; Pauley, 1997). However, few studies of the rhetorical presidency have analyzed a single rhetorical frame related to a specific policy, charting the rhetorical history of a concept and how it has shaped a public policy across different presidencies. I begin to chart a rhetorical history of the term accountability, noting its beginnings with Reagan and then comparing this rhetoric with the current federal education policy of NCLB, signed into law by Bush. This comparison offers insight into how both presidents used the frame of accountability in their rhetoric about education reform, extending other studies that have analyzed their shared rhetorical strategies surrounding other public policies (Winkler, 2007).

Many scholars have analyzed histories of ideological concepts (Atkins-Sayre, 2010; Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Demo, 2005, 2007; Stuckey, 2008), but the central argument of this study is that the rhetorical presidency itself may rely upon general strategies
used by different presidents across individual historical, political, and social contexts. To support this argument, I first analyze the contexts surrounding Reagan and Bush’s presidential rhetoric about education reform. Next, I suggest an intervention in the study of the rhetorical presidency regarding framing and the “bully pulpit.” In contrast to research that suggests the flexibility and evolution of political keywords and framing over time (Hart, Jarvis, Jennings, & Smith-Howell, 2005), the term “accountability” has been used consistently as a frame grounded in the ideology of political liberalism. I then turn to a rhetorical analysis of two Republican presidents who relied on the frame of accountability to ground education reform, tracing their rhetorical strategies. Finally, I conclude with implications in comparing rhetoric of accountability to Democratic presidential rhetoric, including President Barack Obama’s recent granting of NCLB waivers to certain states, which perpetuates the frame of accountability. I suggest a different rhetorical frame of collective responsibility for education reform that might expand the rhetorical opportunities for presidents in the future, shifting the focus back to equality.

Presidential Contexts Shaping Education Reform

A cultural shift has occurred in education reform and public deliberations about education—a shift from equality to a focus on accountability as measured through outcomes. Education reform has often had the goal of improving educational equality in this country, from Brown v. Board of Education to developing magnet schools that integrated segregated schools in the 1960s (Eaton, 2010, p. 31). That context changed with the rise of the standards movement in education during the 1980s and 1990s, which overlapped with the Reagan presidency. This section charts the historical contexts surrounding Reagan and Bush. To respond to their contexts, both presidents used the “bully pulpit” to advocate the value of personal responsibility over equality.

The Ronald Reagan Presidency and the Standards Movement

Rhetorical scholars label Ronald Reagan an optimistic president, who framed a positive vision of the United States through the ideology of individualism (Bates, 2011; Dawson & Bobo, 2004; Gelderman, 1997; Jensen, 2007; Johnstone, 1995). He communicated this ideology through the frontier myth and the myth of the American Dream (Goodnight, 2002; Roof, 2009; Stuckey, 2006). Reagan’s consistent ideology was framed as a “common sense agenda” to create a positive vision of America as a leader in the world (Jensen, 2007; Rowland & Jones, 2006). Bostdorff and Goldzwig (2005) explain this ideology regarding the issue of civil rights, noting that Reagan asserted that “equality of opportunity in the United States had already been accomplished, and furthermore, that individuals—rather than the government—now had to take responsibility for any additional progress that was needed” (p. 662). Reagan’s rhetoric of accountability in education reform complicates this view of Reagan as an optimist while simultaneously reinforcing his larger ideology.
through the concept of personal responsibility. In presidential rhetoric about education, Reagan was decidedly unoptimistic, arguing for accountability of federal funds because of education research and general skepticism of local schools’ ability to achieve desired testing outcomes.

In education policy, Reagan set the precedent for standards-based reform, which emerged in the 1980s. He and fellow conservatives were the first to shift the focus of the federal role in education toward “outcomes rather than inputs—that is, high-stakes testing without investing” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 18). Reagan came out strongly in his 1980 campaign against a federal department of education. Nelson (2008) notes that the Reagan administration sought to limit the expansion of the federal government, consistent with Reagan’s ideology: “Reagan’s education plan, which built on aspects of Nixon’s plan, was to roll back the profusion of federal aid-to-education programs that had emerged since the 1960s” (p. 268).

Although Reagan called for dismantling the U.S. Department of Education, his first Secretary of Education Terrel Bell (from 1981–1985) strengthened the department (Nelson, 2008). Bell was followed by William Bennett, who oversaw the Back-to-Basics movement, which addressed decreasing test scores by emphasizing teaching basic subjects such as reading, math, and science (Jeynes, 2007). The Reagan administration argued that “something far more than just increased government spending on public education was needed to remedy the nation’s education woes” (Jeynes, 2007, p. 407). The focus on a small government is consistent with Reagan’s ideology of individualism, as well as with a core tenet of the Republican Party platform (Republican National Committee, 2012). Reagan’s focus on accountability, a reference to the standards movement during his presidency, set a precedent for how to frame education reform by valuing personal responsibility rather than increasing equality for decades to come.

The George W. Bush Presidency and the NCLB Act

Like Reagan, George W. Bush adhered to an ideology based in individualism, which became evident in education reform rhetoric through the frame of accountability. Many scholars have analyzed Bush’s rhetoric in individual speeches, especially highlighting his faith-based and military-based rhetorical strategies in speaking about issues such as the environment, race, and terrorism (Bostdorff, 2003; Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2004; Medhurst, 2010; Spielvogel, 2005; VanderHaagen, 2008; Wolfe, 2007). However, few scholars have analyzed Bush’s speeches across his entire presidency or specifically studied his ideologically based rhetoric of individualism surrounding the policy of education reform. One exception is a study by Condit (2009), who writes that Bush focused primarily on individual values such as freedom, independence, security, and prosperity in his response to Abu Ghraib. While Bush’s rhetoric on education reform centers on personal responsibility, the policy and its funding were the largest federal intervention in education. Bush accounted for that increase in federal intervention through rhetoric that emphasized taxpayers’ demands for accountability of federal funds.
In contrast to Reagan’s attempts to minimize the federal role in education, Bush increased federal involvement in education through NCLB. In advocating passage of NCLB, Bush reached out to African Americans and other minority groups by promoting the act as an effort to eliminate the “soft bigotry of low expectations” in education (“Text: President Bush’s Acceptance Speech,” 2004). Bush’s first Secretary of Education from 2001–2005 was Rod Paige, the first African American to serve in that office. The policy goal was to reduce educational inequality, but in reality, the policy was not adequately funded. President Bush’s rhetoric responded to the context of educational inequality by demanding accountability and results for federal funding that was not fully provided to states in implementing the law.

One of the NCLB Act’s most controversial aspects that directly relates to Bush’s strategy of accountability involves the stipulations controlling the use of federal Title I funds and their connection to standardized test results (Lang, 2007/2008). The mechanism of testing offers a way to define and enforce accountability (Ravitch, 2010). Standardized testing and state-based assessments hint at state rights—NCLB allows each state to create its own standards, choose its own tests, and define proficiency as it chooses—while creating accountability for federal money by threatening to reduce funding based on lack of progress. Shaker and Heilman (2008) clarify: “The purposes of this federal policy and the state policies it generates are to create a comprehensive system of standards, testing, and accountability and then, based on the results, give federal money as rewards or impose sanctions through withdrawal of federal funds” (p. 44). If student test results fail to meet NCLB standards, schools lose portions of their federal funding. By defining accountability through testing outcomes, Bush created an audience of U.S. citizens that valued fiscal responsibility over educational equality. In Bush’s rhetoric about NCLB, federal funds must be spent wisely, which can only be assessed through testing.

The federal government promised to provide funding to implement all of the requirements of NCLB; however, it has in reality asked many states to provide some of their own funding to meet these requirements (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). If schools fail to meet federal requirements, they do not receive the promised Title I funds, or they have to spend a percentage of the funds on particular areas such as teacher education. NCLB faced reauthorization in 2007, but Congress continues to struggle with how to change accountability standards in the law (Webley, 2012). The Obama administration recently granted waivers to 10 states who would not meet the annual goals and therefore face sanctions from NCLB; however, this rhetoric still focused on accountability and the importance of states developing standardized testing mechanisms to measure educational success (Hu, 2012).

Complicating the Rhetorical Presidency’s Influence on Public Policy

Both Reagan and Bush used rhetoric to highlight their preferences for education policy that would either limit federal funds in education or hold schools accountable for federal funds given to states. Research on the “rhetorical presidency” suggests that presidential rhetoric has been able to influence public policy through at least two
ways: rhetorical framing and definition and the “bully pulpit” function of the presidency. This essay responds to Asen’s (2010) call in a special issue of Rhetoric & Public Affairs on rhetoric’s influence on policy: “We [rhetorical scholars] effectively have neglected ‘meta’ studies that explicitly consider the role of rhetoric in public policy and outline a rhetorical approach to policy analysis” (p. 124). As noted above, numerous scholars have analyzed ideological histories associated with issues such as race, immigration, animal welfare, and human rights; however, none have addressed the ideological history of education reform across presidencies. Articulating the rhetorical history of a strategy such as accountability lends insight into the significance of the rhetorical presidency in shaping the conversation about policy over significant periods of time, despite changing contexts.

**Rhetorical Framing and Definition**

The first aspect of the rhetorical presidency that has clear implications for assessing how rhetoric shapes public policy is rhetorical framing. Edwards (2009) defines a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of an issue or conflict [that] suggests what the controversy is about and what is at stake” (p. 64). Entman (1993) describes framing as a process of “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Simply put, framing involves orienting one’s audience toward an object or issue (Smerecnik & Dionisopoulos, 2009). Presidents use different frames for a variety of policy issues, sometimes maintaining one rhetorical frame for a number of policies, while at other times choosing different frames for each specific policy (Asen, 2010).

While many studies outline the various rhetorical frames used by different presidents, few studies have focused on the use of a *common* rhetorical frame across multiple presidencies. This essay historicizes the frame of accountability across two Republican presidencies, outlining how both presidents framed the debate on education reform through the ideological lens of political liberalism. The fact that both presidents used this frame in different historical, political, and social contexts reinforces Lakoff’s (2004) model of the Republican Party’s association with a “strict father” morality based on an individualistic worldview. However, it complicates Lakoff’s binary model of Republicans’ association with “strict father” and Democrats’ association with “nurturant parent,” which is based on more of a communitarian worldview. Because accountability is used by both Republican and Democratic presidents, this study suggests that the rhetorical presidency itself may take on its own set of rhetorical strategies that cross party lines. Callaghan and Schnell (2005) note various types of frames used in political discourse, defining a *generic* frame as a broad concept that may be used for specific policy issues, usually by the media. I posit that the rhetorical presidency itself may operate with *generic* frames, such as accountability in framing education policy.

Closely associated with rhetorical framing is the strategy of definition. Definition allows presidents to more specifically frame their policies, literally defining or redefining terms. Presidents use definition to shape how citizens and Congress
understand social problems (Whitford & Yates, 2009). Presidents often frame social problems around specific values, which is easier than explaining complex policy choices (Edwards, 2009). I posit that the term accountability became an important concept in advocating for education policy and, specifically, the issue of federal funding. Instead of explaining the social and economic inequality of education, fiscal responsibility became the overarching value grounding education reform.

The “Bully Pulpit”: A Role for Constitutive Rhetoric

In addition to rhetorical framing and definition, what scholars call the “bully pulpit” is another area of policy influence within the rhetorical presidency. Presidents have a unique speaking position through which they advocate for certain policies to Congress and the American people. The concept of the “bully pulpit” originated with President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the first presidents in the twentieth century to fully work with the press, creating a room for reporters at the White House (Greenberg, 2011). Edwards (2003) studies how presidents influence public opinion, arguing that the “bully pulpit” is largely ineffective in achieving majority support from U.S. voters. However, in a later book, he notes that the “bully pulpit” is “a direct and persuasive relationship with the public,” offering the president a direct line to citizens not accessible to other branches of government (Edwards, 2009, p. 19). For example, Reagan used his “bully pulpit” to persuade U.S. citizens that personal responsibility and limited government were the right ideas to guide policy making in the 1980s (Muir, 2003).

I suggest that the “bully pulpit” has other goals than simply rallying public opinion of a president. Edwards’ and others’ research on the bully pulpit primarily approaches the concept from the perspective of public opinion (Edwards, 2003; Mervin, 1995). Presidents often use the “bully pulpit” for other reasons, such as to create particular roles for citizens, what rhetorical scholars call constitutive rhetoric. Campbell and Jamieson (1990) suggest that rhetorically savvy presidents not only adapt their speeches to specific audiences, they actually transform citizens to become agents of change who readily support certain policies that the president favors. My analysis suggests that Reagan and Bush both constituted audiences who value fiscal responsibility over educational equality in creating education reform.

Indeed, another effect of the “bully pulpit” is the president’s ability to change possible directions of deliberation about a particular policy, what scholars call “going public.” In this strategy, the president uses his rhetorical position to limit the pluralism of deliberation that should occur among other branches of government (John, Domke, Coe, & Graham, 2007). This can occur through speeches to the American citizens but also through managing the press (Dorsey, 2002). Although some scholars view this strategy as a limitation in achieving a balance of powers, the rise of concepts such as unitary executive theory supports the claim that the president increasingly uses the executive office to overpower the other branches (Beasley, 2010b). Since both presidents increasingly relied on their power in the executive office to promote and create policy, a rhetorical analysis comparing the two might lend insight into how
both presidents successfully negotiated the role of the “bully pulpit” in their presidencies, not just to bolster public opinion but to rhetorically create an audience that valued fiscal responsibility in education reform.

Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush: A Comparative Analysis of Education Rhetoric

Reagan may have wanted to dismantle the Department of Education, but his rhetoric also offered accountability as a reason for the federal government to remain involved in education. The Reagan era was also when both Democrats and Republicans began pushing for standards-based reform, indicating a cultural shift from equality to outcomes in education policy. How did Reagan and Bush use rhetorical framing and the “bully pulpit” to create an audience that valued personal responsibility rather than equality in education reform?1

Ronald Reagan’s Rhetoric of Accountability and Federal Funding of Education

First, Reagan emphasized accountability in federal spending for education. He outlined the poor test results and low status of schools, making the argument that taxpayers must demand results from federal money. This view of Reagan that focused on poor test results and poor schools is in conflict with scholars’ general assessment of Reagan as the optimistic president, suggesting a more nuanced view of Reagan’s presidential persona. In a radio address on education, Reagan (1983a) explained: “Federal spending on education soared eightfold in the last 20 years.... But during the same period, scholastic aptitude test scores went down, down, and down.” Such presidential rhetoric did not frame education in terms of equality but instead framed education funding in terms of accountability as defined through testing outcomes. Reagan used antithesis to develop a contrast between federal funding and test scores, creating a focus on fiscal responsibility and contrasting outcomes with tax dollars spent.

In many of his speeches about education, Reagan connected the increase in federal funding of education to the decrease in students’ standardized test scores. He did so in part because of his promise to abolish the Department of Education. Reagan’s early presidential rhetoric, however, seemed to contradict that stance. Reagan (1981) explained: “We’ve increased the share of Department of Education Title III funds spent on black colleges, and that trend will continue.” As early as 1981, Reagan supported the role of the Department of Education in funding education, especially for minority groups, seemingly in an effort to increase equality. However, Reagan soon shifted his rhetoric about federal funding to focus not on equality but instead on standardized testing and the importance of outcomes that might measure the effectiveness of federal spending.

Just two years later, Reagan (1983a) proposed abolishing the Department of Education in two speeches: “But better education doesn’t mean a bigger Department of Education. In fact, that Department should be abolished.” At first, Reagan argued
for an increase in federal funding and articulated a positive view of the Department of Education, but later he shifted to abolishing the department on the grounds that additional funding should come from private sources. Reagan wanted fewer federal and more private funds for schools. Reagan (1983a) said: “We’re encouraging corporations, community organizations, and neighborhood groups across the country to adopt schools.” In this way, Reagan could appease conservatives who were against the formation of the department, while increasing funding for education through private means. Reagan’s focus on private resources rather than federal funds was consistent with the ideology of political liberalism and the Republican Party platform of limited government. The argument for private resources also supplemented his rhetorical frame of accountability in the use of federal funds. Since increased federal funds had not produced better outcomes, the Department of Education had failed, and Reagan invited Americans to look to the private sector.

Importantly, Reagan’s rhetoric about abolishing the Department of Education also included a more active role for states in educational policy. Reagan (1987a) said: “A number of States—for example, New Hampshire—spent only modestly on education, but had among the Nation’s most effective schools.” If increased federal funding had not improved performance, then such funding seemed unnecessary and fit Reagan’s proposal to abolish the department. In his speech about the final report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Reagan (1983b) explained: “I was interested to see that you noted the almost uninterrupted decline in student achievement in the scores during the past two decades, decades in which the Federal presence in education grew and grew.” Reagan’s use of antithesis yet again with testing scores and a federal presence in education bolstered the Republican Party belief in limited government and allowed him the opportunity to ground education reform in individualism and personal responsibility. This supported his overall platform to give responsibility back to states, local government, and parents.

Reagan emphasized that education should begin in the home. Reagan (1983a) explained: “Instead, we must do a better job teaching the basics…remembering that education does not begin with Washington officials or even State and local officials. It begins in the home.” This stance fit Reagan’s other rhetoric about prayer in schools and his plan for private school vouchers, bolstering the ideology of political liberalism and the rights of the individual. Reagan (1983b) stated: “I believe that parents, not government, have the primary responsibility for the education of their children.” Rhetoric about the home, family, and faith seemed appropriate for Reagan in advocating for reduced federal funds for education and was consistent with his overall ideology that framed educational success through personal responsibility.

Finally, Reagan argued for the necessity of reform as an important telos for education policy. Reagan (1984) noted: “With school reform, as with so many other challenges again and again in our nation’s history, the American people are showing it can be done.” Reagan (1987b) consistently used the term “reform”: “We must overcome the obstacles that block reform. Successful reform won’t come about from the top down… We must make education reform a reality.” Reform happens not through the government’s mandate but through the agency of individuals, specifically
teachers, students, and parents. Reagan’s rhetoric about reform remained consistent throughout his presidency, using the “bully pulpit” to associate education reform with the value of personal responsibility. Reagan created an audience that desired fiscal responsibility in education through using rhetorical strategies such as antithesis to create a visual for the American people that contrasted poor testing outcomes with an increase in federal tax dollars. Accountability of federal funds through parents and the home became a way to redefine education reform in favor of outcomes and individual accountability rather than systemic measures to ensure equality.

George W. Bush’s Rhetoric of Accountability and Federal Funding of Education

Reagan’s presidential rhetoric framed education reform in terms of accountability of federal funds as defined through testing outcomes rather than equality. Bush echoed Reagan’s remarks when he explained that if the federal government was involved in education through funding, then citizens had a right to hold schools accountable. This stance created an ideological-based rhetorical strategy for Bush that bolstered political liberalism in education reform. Similar to Reagan, Bush’s use of the “bully pulpit” also created an audience that valued fiscal responsibility over equality in educational outcomes. For example, Bush (2000) said: “And those who spend your tax dollars must be held accountable. When a school district receives federal funds to teach poor children, we expect them to learn.” Bush’s use of language here, such as the expectation that poor students learn, reinforces the created audience as one that is not poor and demands proof of educational success through testing outcomes. If taxpayers’ money is given to schools through federal funding, then citizens have a right to hold schools and poor children accountable, which deemphasizes the role of the federal government in education by rhetorically returning responsibility back to the citizenry and, specifically, to U.S. taxpayers.

Bush’s emphasis on the local in earlier presidential rhetoric about accountability and federal funds echoed Reagan’s position. Bush (2004) said: “We are insisting on accountability, empowering parents and teachers, and making sure that local people are in charge of their schools.” Importantly, in his earlier rhetoric, Bush emphasized the role of local individuals, especially in his presidential nomination acceptance speeches at the Republican National Convention in 2000 and 2004. Like Reagan, Bush specifically listed parents and teachers as the individuals that ensure educational success. Rather than focusing on structural causes of educational failure, Bush placed the responsibility on specific individuals, reinforcing the ideology of political liberalism and the Republican Party platform of limited government. When government is involved in education, which Bush emphasized should happen on the local level, individual citizens must be “watchdogs” of government spending.

In addition to emphasizing local responsibility in earlier rhetoric about accountability, Bush shifted from talking about NCLB as “reform” to demanding results from money already given to local schools. Bush (2001) used the rhetorical frame of accountability with federal funds directly in his first State of the Union address: “When it comes to our schools, dollars alone do not always make the difference... So
So we must tie funding to higher standards and accountability for results.” In his earlier presidential rhetoric, Bush echoed Reagan, defining reform through testing outcomes. The argument that federal funding must be connected to “higher standards and accountability for results” created an audience of fiscally conservative citizens who understood educational success primarily through testing outcomes and not through any measurement of lowering the achievement gap between majority and minority students.

Whereas Reagan was consistent in using the term reform, Bush varied his comments on reform. In earlier rhetoric about federal funding and accountability, Bush used the term “reform.” In later speeches, however, Bush (2007a) was adamant that NCLB was not “reform.” “Now the task is to build on the success without watering down standards, without taking control from local communities, and without backsliding and calling it reform.” Perhaps Bush called his proposals reform in earlier speeches to justify the necessity of NCLB, especially as it related to accountability in the case of federal funds. Once NCLB was in place, Bush may have wanted to step away from the word “reform,” simply because of the problems many schools had in implementing the law without adequate federal funds. The government escaped blame for failing to fund the law if NCLB was not reform but instead a push for accountability for funds already given to schools. Bush therefore reiterated the rhetorical frame of accountability first used by Reagan but redefined the debate to focus more on federal dollars rather than shifting the source of education funding to private entities such as businesses. Bush’s iteration of the ideology of political liberalism had less to do with privacy and more to do with measuring outcomes, relying on the work of individuals such as teachers and parents to help students achieve educational success. In contrast, Reagan’s ideology focused on private sources for educational funding and valuing privacy in political liberalism.

Ronald Reagan’s Rhetoric of Accountability and Combatting Racism

In addition to rhetoric regarding the accountability of federal funds, Reagan and Bush tied the issue of combatting racism to rhetoric that emphasized higher standards, results, and accountability in connection to standardized testing. Education is a product of and is implicated in many other socioeconomic problems and issues. Noguera (2010) explains this position: “From crime and unemployment to teen pregnancy and even racism, education—or lack thereof—is implicated in many of our nation’s social and economic problems” (p. 12). One would think that presidential rhetoric about education reform would touch on some of these bigger social and economic problems, but this is not the case in either Reagan or Bush’s rhetoric. Both presidents relied on accountability as a frame grounded in political liberalism and the value of individual actions over structural changes.

According to these presidents, if educators and parents have low expectations of students, especially minorities, then such students have a harder time succeeding. Reagan (1984) explained: “On academic expectations, it’s clear that we must expect our students to perform to higher standards.” Reagan believed in the importance of
increasing expectations. Reagan (1988) argued for higher standards: “When we’ve looked at schools that work across the country...what works is not money or being in a prosperous neighborhood but establishing a direction, that is, setting standards.” Defining the rhetorical frame of accountability through outcomes was not new with NCLB. Although Reagan seemed optimistic in setting higher standards, he noted that the solution is not through federal spending. Reagan again supported the Republican Party platform of limited government, emphasizing that economic and social solutions on a larger scale do not increase educational success. Instead, increasing standards, as measured through testing outcomes, becomes the indicator of educational success.

Reagan addressed many audiences involved with organizations that focused on the rights of minorities. In almost all of these speeches, Reagan connected rhetoric of accountability to combatting racism, arguing that improved standards can improve the lives of minorities. Reagan (1981) stated: “Can black parents say, despite a massive influx of Federal aid, that education standards in our schools have improved appreciably?” This rhetoric targeted minority students and their inability to rise out of poverty without such standards. Reagan’s use of a rhetorical question in this speech emphasized that parents of minority students cannot say that federal aid positively influenced education standards in schools. This argument emphasized the importance of individual solutions to reforming education and not structural solutions on a social or economic level. Reagan suggested that good schools help disadvantaged kids escape poverty through higher standards. Reagan (1987b) said: “By giving students the knowledge and values they need to succeed, good schools can help children overcome poverty.” Here, Reagan again reinforced the ideology of political liberalism, arguing that poverty is not a structural issue to be solved by government spending or social programs. Reagan was unoptimistic regarding the government’s ability to improve individuals’ lives, suggesting that local schools, not federal intervention in education, are able to instill values for minorities to achieve educational success. This argument paved the way for the “soft bigotry of low expectations” rhetoric used by Bush.

George W. Bush’s Rhetoric of Accountability and Combatting Racism

One reason that legislators from both political parties supported NCLB was because of rhetoric about the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” In fact, Bush used this phrase in both convention speeches, as well as in speeches about the implementation and anniversary of NCLB, and finally in a speech to the National and State Teachers of the Year (Bush, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008b). After all, who would oppose the law and implicitly support the “bigotry of low expectations?” Bush framed NCLB in terms of fighting racism to seemingly appeal to the tradition of equality in education; however, the policy has not been able to fix the achievement gap among students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Webley, 2012). Even when referencing the goal of equality, Bush used the “bully pulpit” to define accountability of federal funds not in terms of increasing equality but through increasing outcomes
and test scores. I suggest Bush may have done so not only to shape public opinion but more importantly to use the “bully pulpit” to create an audience of U.S. citizens that valued fiscal responsibility over socioeconomic reform of education.

When Bush did not refer to the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” he still justified NCLB and its value in combatting racism. In his remarks about the reauthorization of NCLB, Bush (2007b) appealed to this argument: “No Child Left Behind is helping replace a culture of low expectations with a commitment to high achievement for all.” Bush directly stated that minorities themselves are to blame for educational failure. The “culture of low expectations” was not associated with successful schools, which are mostly composed of majority students with a high socioeconomic status. Rather, Bush talked about the “culture of low expectations” in the context of failing schools, which are usually attended by minority students coming from a working class, low socioeconomic status. Bush spoke about the value of NCLB in narrowing the achievement gap, especially among minorities (Bush, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a). However, Bush was careful to note that federal funding cannot be the cure-all for the achievement gap and that “higher standards” were needed instead of just an increase in federal spending. Bush (2002) stated: “We are willing to spend more for education, and we will spend it on what works. In return for this commitment, my administration and the American people expect results.” This constituted an audience of Americans that saw fiscal responsibility as more important than equality in reforming education. Both Democrats and Republicans could feel justified in extending federal funds if such a move helped fight against U.S. racism. In reality, the policy has helped identify achievement gaps through tracking demographics but has not been able to narrow them (Webley, 2012). Presidential rhetoric about the policy did not define accountability in terms of equality but instead in terms of measurement, standards, and outcomes, which may be why the policy has not really increased equality in education.

Contrasting Reagan and Bush’s Approaches to Rhetoric of Accountability

One of the biggest differences between the rhetorical framing of education reform for Reagan and Bush was in their rhetoric about the source of federal funds. This may have been a key difference in their shared ideology of political liberalism. Reagan wanted fewer federal and more private funds for schools, emphasizing the importance of privacy in political liberalism, whereas Bush sought an increase in public federal funds for education through NCLB but framed the increase in terms of individualism through accountability for parents and teachers. Reagan sought to decrease federal funds and turned to the private sector through corporations to find additional funding for schools, whereas Bush emphasized an increase in the amount of federal funds along with accountability and standardized test results. These were two different ways to articulate the rhetoric of accountability. In Reagan’s rhetoric, accountability was connected to citizens through the private sector and the contributions of private companies, businesses, and community groups, whereas in Bush’s rhetoric, accountability was tied to U.S. taxpayers and the public. This observation becomes
important in analyzing how these presidents were able to discuss education reform via individual accountability without discussing the means for funding, inequality of educational funding, or the segregation of schools. In both presidents’ views, businesses or individual citizens are made primary, rather than focusing on structural issues of educational funding, bolstering the Republican Party platform of limited government while reinforcing the values of personal responsibility and fiscal conservatism for U.S. citizens. Both presidents shared a common rhetorical frame of accountability as defined through testing outcomes. Across disparate political, historical, and social contexts, both presidents used the “bully pulpit” to create an audience of fiscal conservatives that demanded results and had high expectations for all students, including minorities, without considering structural causes of educational inequality.

Both Reagan and Bush hinted at equality in their rhetoric about education, especially when speaking to minority groups, but only superficially through suggesting that accountability would fight racism. In analyzing both Reagan and Bush’s rhetoric about education reform as framed through accountability, both presidents actually blamed minorities for their lack of success because of low standards (Reagan) or a “culture of low expectations” (Bush). Rhetoric about combatting racism is especially problematic because the emphasis on accountability frames education reform as an issue of personal responsibility. Similar to the myth of the American dream, personal responsibility blames individuals for their lack of educational success rather than focusing on larger structural inequalities. Instead of talking about racism and segregated schools as key causes of inequality, and what U.S. citizens can do to alleviate such problems, presidents since Reagan have used the “bully pulpit” to emphasize the value of personal responsibility in education. In doing so, presidents have thereby avoided the complex discussion about the best structural, long-term solutions for increasing equality.

### Conclusion: Implications for the Rhetorical Presidency and U.S. Education Reform

After analyzing Reagan and Bush’s presidential rhetoric about education, I offer two implications of how the rhetoric of accountability has been important in shaping education reform. First, this analysis has implications for further study of the rhetorical presidency and its influence on public policy, noting the development of a common rhetorical frame consistent across presidents, and similarly defined. It expands upon McIntush’s claim that how presidents discuss political issues shapes the possibilities for future policy, more specifically answering how these presidents perpetuated the ideology of political liberalism. Both Reagan and Bush used a common frame of accountability as defined through testing outcomes, regardless of their individual contexts. This essay shows the importance of tracing an ideological term or rhetorical frame over time, and how such a frame can remain consistent across political contexts and partisan boundaries, suggesting a general strategy for the rhetorical presidency, or perhaps what Callaghan and Schnell (2005) call a generic frame. In this
Reagan seemed to have been one of the first presidents to define accountability through test results. Although President Jimmy Carter also used the term accountability, he did not relate accountability to standardized testing and individual accountability of students, parents, and teachers (Carter, 1979a). Even when Carter did mention testing, he did not shift the burden to individuals. In contrast to Reagan and Bush’s emphases on individual accountability and the value of personal responsibility, Carter (1979b) specifically mentioned how bureaucracy is to blame when education fails.

Reagan’s use of accountability was quite different than Carter’s, and it was this version that became a precedent for future presidents, including Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In contrast to Carter, Clinton shifted to Reagan’s version of accountability that focused on standards as related to test performance and individual students, parents, and teachers (Clinton, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1997, 1998). Clinton (1995b) said: “And the direction that I have taken...has been to focus on high expectations, high standards, and high accountability and rewarding the assumption of personal responsibility by students.” The Obama administration has also continued the legacy of Reagan and Bush by focusing on accountability and “higher standards” (Duncan, 2009; Obama, 2009, 2012). This study shows the importance of a cross-presidential study of a single rhetorical frame. Accountability is a general strategy in the rhetorical presidency to avoid talking about contentious issues such as large disparities in educational funding. Future studies could focus on other ideological terms that seem to be an invention resource within the rhetorical presidency.

Second, the rhetorical frame of accountability has limited the possibilities for education reform by redefining the policy through an emphasis on outcomes rather than equality. The “bully pulpit” has been used in education reform not just to shape public opinion but rather to create an audience of Americans that value fiscal conservatism in education reform, holding individuals on the local level accountable for federal funds. President Obama’s educational policies, especially Race to the Top, use rhetoric that incorporates a free market ideology of states competing for education funds instead of considering why certain schools keep failing. Schools often fail because of issues such as unequal property taxes, socioeconomic differences, and housing segregation (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Even in President Obama’s waivers of NCLB, his discourse centers on rhetoric of accountability and higher standards. For example, in Obama’s (2012) remarks about the waivers, he stated: “I said back then the goals of No Child Left Behind were the right ones. Standards and accountability, those are the right goals.” Although he granted the waivers because these states had alternative plans that offer greater flexibility in measuring these standards, the goals of Obama’s education policy still center on the rhetorical frame of accountability as defined through testing outcomes. Instead of using this frame, the Obama administration and future presidents might reframe education reform in terms of collective responsibility or the ideology of political republicanism, especially between parents, federal government officials, state government officials, teachers, teacher unions, and students. All of these parties are crucial to deliberation about passing education reform to achieve equality.
I have argued that the rhetorical frame of accountability was crucial for the educational policy of Reagan and Bush and has remained consistent in presidential rhetoric across presidencies. Both used the “bully pulpit” to create an audience that values fiscal responsibility and defines accountability through outcomes rather than equality. Presidents since Ronald Reagan have failed to highlight the social and economic causes of educational inequality, issues that are more difficult to discuss and resolve. I suggest we consider long-term solutions to education reform, so NCLB can become a policy where no child is blamed for educational failure simply because of where he or she grew up, and all children have a better opportunity to receive a high-quality education.

Note

[1] I analyze the following speeches given by President Ronald Reagan: a 1981 speech to the NAACP; a March 1983 radio address on education; an April 1983 speech about the final report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education; a 1984 address at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Secondary School Principals; a March 1987 speech at the National Governors’ Association-Department of Education conference; a May 1987 address given upon receiving the Department of Education Report on Improving Education; and a 1988 speech given upon receiving a report on American education. In addition to Reagan’s speeches, I also analyze the following speeches given by President George W. Bush: the convention nomination acceptance speech in 2000; his State of the Union address introducing NCLB in 2001; his speech given upon signing NCLB into law in January 2002; his remarks about the one-year anniversary of NCLB in January 2003; the convention nomination acceptance speech in 2004; his 2007 State of the Union address requesting the reauthorization of NCLB; and finally, his rhetoric from late 2007–2008 that references the failed reauthorization of NCLB by Congress (remarks given in reference to reauthorization of NCLB in October 2007, a statement given about NCLB in April 2008, as well as the speech to the National and State Teachers of the Year given in April 2008). These 16 speeches are certainly not exhaustive of either Reagan or Bush’s rhetoric about education; however, they are some of the highlighted speeches about education that demonstrate their shift in talking about accountability in education across their presidencies.

References


