

A Analysis of Anne C. Pluta's *Persuading the Public: The Evolution of Popular Presidential
Communication from Washington to Trump*

In 2023, Anne C. Pluta, associate professor of political science at Rowan University, published her first book titled *Persuading the Public: The Evolution of Popular Presidential Communication from Washington to Trump*. This book analyzes both historic and quantitative data regarding the methods presidents use to communicate with the American people and how these methods have changed throughout the nation's history. The argument that Pluta established throughout her book is that political communication opportunities are shaped by structural factors including the media environment, technological innovations, and structural changes in political party relations (Pluta, 2). In evaluating American history, Pluta defines six distinct periods of popular presidential communication: *Going Elite, 1789-1828*; *Going Partisan, 1829-1865*; *Going Regional, 1866-1893*; *Going Almost National, 1894-1921*; *Going National, 1922-1992*; and *Going Targeted, 1993-2021*. Within each of these periods, Pluta analyzes numerous instances and examples of popular presidential communication within the context of four dimensions: mode, frequency, content, and audience.

Within her first defined period, *Going Elite: 1789-1828*, Pluta explains that as the Constitution has left the boundaries of the presidency quite vague, the early American presidents were in the unique position of creating norms and establishing precedents—some of which have remained for much of America's history. Pluta claims that the persuadable public—which she defines as the portion of the population that the president is able to influence (Pluta 8)—at this time consisted of a rather small group of elite individuals, all of whom were wealthier, educated, landowning white men (Pluta 21). Technology at the time limited both the ability to print and distribute presidential messages on a large scale and the president's ability to travel throughout the country (Pluta 28). Given these limitations, presidents opted to give few speeches in favor of

more written rhetoric. With only a few newspapers—very few of which were national—publishing and reprinting presidential speeches and messages took time to reach all enfranchised individuals with the power to influence policy through the power of their vote. However, this method was more efficient and effective compared to touring and giving speeches (Pluta 31). To reach specific groups within the persuadable public more quickly, presidents did give some speeches. This method allowed presidents to speak directly to their constituents about specific topics and policy. George Washington for example frequently gave speeches as a means of creating unity and national identity. Doing so allowed him to reach beyond the persuadable public to women and illiterate individuals as well (Pluta 27). However, considering the lack of safe and efficient transportation for both the president and his audiences, this method was not preferred. Transportation became an even greater issue as a result of the Louisiana Purchase which nearly doubled the size of the American territory in 1803. As more people moved West, the challenge of connecting with the persuadable public only increased.

Within her second defined period, *Going Partisan: 1829-1865*, Pluta explains the expansion of enfranchisement and the changing media environment of the United States. As the right to vote expanded to all white men, regardless of property ownership and literacy, the president's pursuable public expanded as well (Pluta 46). With the improvements in printing technology, more newspapers were established and more copies could be produced (Pluta 49). Many of these new newspapers were sponsored by partisan groups and individuals which resulted in the printing of articles and information that aligned with a specific party's view points (Pluta 49). Although this meant that the president had easy access to his supporters through a channel that went over the heads of Congress, partisan newspapers limited the president's ability

to reach beyond his party (Pluta 46). Throughout this period, written rhetoric remained the preferential method of presidential communication. Still, some speeches were given—many by Andrew Jackson and John Tyler while on tour—but the lack of transportation technology continued to limit their frequency and the locations where they were delivered.

As Pluta examines her third period, *Going Regional: 1866-1893*, she notes the first significant increase in spoken communication. Due to the development of the railroad, the frequency and length of presidential tours increased thus expanding the president's persuadable public even further (Pluta 71). By speaking directly to their public, presidents were able to avoid any intermediate commentary included in newspaper publications (Pluta 73). As the country remained fractured after the Civil War, presidents began to tour more frequently and much of the rhetoric focused on creating unity and reestablishing a national image. After another significant increase in the persuadable public occurred after Emancipation, speaking directly to the public was an effective way of gaining support from newly enfranchised voters. At this time, partisan press remained strong and regional political parties developed. However, fewer papers depended on being subsidized by political parties (Pluta 73). Presidents also became unafraid to speak on policy and began asserting themselves into the conversations of the legislative branch which led to more media coverage (Pluta 78).

During the fourth period that Pluta defines, *Going Almost National: 1894-1921*, she notes another significant change in the media environment. As professionalism within the media industry grew, newspapers became more independent of political parties though remained relatively biased in their portrayal of political events (Pluta 108). Newspapers began to focus on more than just the presidency and government. This shift resulted in the president having to

compete for coverage. Though newspapers remained the only way to reach the entirety of the persuadable public, presidents began to address individual interest groups that were gaining influence more so than political parties at the time (Pluta 109). In an attempt to circumvent the media and address the public directly, many presidents began to give speeches and tour more frequently in order to connect to these growing interest groups (Pluta 109). Pluta gives President Howard Taft as an example calling him “the most talkative” citing the 311 times he spoke publicly in 1909 (Pluta 116).

In her fifth period, *Going National: 1922-1992*, Pluta covers the most significant shift in the media environment in American history: radio and television. Presidents during this period of time had unprecedented access to their persuadable public (Pluta 140). Although it took some time for the majority of American households to get radios and later TVs, presidents were able to speak to their constituents in real time, eliminating the delay of information that occurred when publishing written messages (Pluta 144). Since radio and television allowed presidents to address all of their constituents simultaneously, presidents began to tour less and most spoken rhetoric was delivered on a national scale from within the White House. At this time, networks were relatively nonpartisan and provided the president with a way of connecting with his audience without additional—potentially biased—commentary (Pluta 141). Furthermore, the American people were able to listen to the president from the comfort of their own homes and therefore more people tuned in to hear what the president had to say (Pluta 145). And unlike radio, television provided Americans the ability to see their president in addition to hearing him. Being able to see and hear the president created more intimacy between the president and his constituents and helped strengthen political involvement and national unity (Pluta 151). Towards

the end of this period, presidents did begin to travel domestically more often as a result of Air Force 1 but continued to take advantage of the ease of radio and television communication.

Finally, in her last period, *Going Targeted: 1993-2021*, Pluta starts off by stating that the persuadable public has decreased as a result of a more competitive and biased media environment. She claims that it is increasingly rare for presidents to address the nation as a whole and has taken to addressing smaller audiences through smaller channels to rally support (Pluta 162). As news channels and media began to focus on more than just government, presidents received less coverage than they had during the Golden Age of Communication. Presidents are also facing an increasingly biased media environment filled with misinformation making it difficult to reach beyond one's supporters and—in the case they are able to do so— even harder to convince non-supporters (Pluta 164). Presidents thus began to use numerous types of media outlets in order to connect with the largest number of constituents possible. President Obama, for example, used Instagram and talk shows in addition to mainstream media outlets in order to connect with younger constituents (Pluta 165).

Overall, Pluta was thorough in her analysis of how popular presidential communication has changed over the course of history. However an argument can be made that the data is surface-level—simple compilations of dates and instances of presidential messages— and thus is not sufficiently compelling. Much of the evidence Pluta used to support her argument is historical. As she examines the history of American presidential communication, Pluta often recounts history and references common facts—such as Thomas Jefferson deciding to give a written State of the Union address, William Harding being the first president to have access to radio, and changes in enfranchisement — to explain the changing media environment and size

and demographic of the persuadable public. The text is missing information such as who actually read the published messages or attended speeches and if the public understood and was persuaded by what the president had to say. The lack of this information is understandable as this data is not easily obtainable considering the time range Pluta is examining.

Additionally, she included various compilations of data that indicate frequency and method changes in presidential communication. For instance, she includes a list of tours taken by different presidents (Table 1.1: George Washington's Tours (1789-1797) and Table 1.2: James Monroe's Tours (1817-1825)) and lists of interviews that others gave (Table 3.4: Rutherford B. Hayes Interviews). However significant evidence is not provided representing the change in content of these presidential communications or the change in audience—who the president's communication is directed to. In the case of the former, Pluta mentions periods where presidents were less inclined to speak on policy when the electorate was small and the country was young or focused on inspiring unity amongst the states after the Civil War. In regard to the latter, Pluta speculates who the president is addressed by examining the salutations used but there is no comprehensive data provided within any of the periods regarding who presidential messages were intended for. However, regardless of any data insufficiencies, Pluta's argument remains strong and is thoroughly and thoughtfully examined overall.

Bibliography

Pluta, Anne C. *Persuading the Public: The Evolution of Popular Presidential Communication from Washington to Trump*. University Press of Kansas, 2023.