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The Good Citizen: Presidential Rhetoric, Immigrants, and Naturalization Ceremonies

Jason A. Edwards
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ABSTRACT: This essay examines how American presidents define the “good citizen,” particularly as it relates to naturalized immigrants. Because citizens who are naturalized have to go through an onerous process to become citizens they can offer lessons to natural-born Americans who take their citizenship for granted. I argue that presidents construct naturalized immigrants as the lifeblood of American progress and power. The accomplishments of individual citizen heroes provide something for all to emulate. At the same time, presidents define the good citizen in a one-dimensional way that undermines the potential of communal activities to bring issues and problems to light that need to be discussed, debated, and potentially solved.

KEYWORDS: immigration, naturalization ceremony, citizenship, presidential rhetoric, George Bush, Barack Obama

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It seems that there is a constant assembly line of complaints amongst pundits, politicians, and policymakers regarding citizens and their specific practices. In communication studies, the issue of citizenship is a common topic. In a survey of the literature on this subject, Rufo and Atchison (2011) argue there is an apparent dialectic within this literature which defines citizens as being, on the one hand, a lay or ordinary person who is far removed from political debates and inactive within their own community. On the other hand, citizens are also portrayed as being conscious of their need to speak up, be active, and engaged in their community. Those who do are considered to be the epitome of the good citizen.

This dialectic of citizenship is of particular importance to rhetorical scholars because citizenship is, as Troy Murphy (2003) suggested, a rhetorical construct. As he noted, we can understand citizenship through examining what is “expressed and achieves meaning through public discourse, the recurring themes, images, and appeals concerning ideal citizenship constitute an identifiable rhetorical form” (p. 194). A year later, Robert Asen (2004), proposing a discourse theory of citizenship, asked “how do people enact citizenship” (p. 191)? Similarly, Michael Schudson (1998) questioned what is “the character and civic practices of a person who admirably carries out the responsibilities of citizenship” (Schudson, 1998, p. 315)? In other words, all three scholars ask about or propose what are the specific characteristics and practices of a citizen, particularly an “ideal citizen”? What defines, if anything, aspects of this rhetorical dialectic?

For this particular essay, I am interested in how American presidents rhetorically construct the good citizen? If we accept the premise that citizenship is a rhetorical construct then what the president says about specific “character and civic practices,” which would include “the recurring themes, images, and appeals concerning ideal citizenship,” should be of paramount importance. The president is the only office elected by all of its citizens. Symbolically, the president and his accompanying discourse offer the means to understand what constitutes an ideal American identity and citizenry. At the same time, the presidency is inherently a conservative institution. Presidents are not at the vanguard of social change, but presidential rhetoric can set the stage for examining the boundaries of citizenship (Stuckey, 2004). Thus, it can be concluded that modern presidential rhetoric is a proper venue to examine what constitutes good citizenship.

For my purposes here, I am particularly interested in presidential rhetoric concerning newly minted citizens. This kind of rhetoric would primarily be found at naturalization ceremonies of immigrants. Why naturalization ceremonies? First, presidential discourse at naturalization ceremonies is a relatively untapped resource. In my research I could find no studies that focused solely on this specific genre of discourse. This study offers the first opportunity to explore what presidents have to say in these rhetorical situations. Second, most of the naturalization ceremony addresses have occurred in the post-9/11 era. Examining what Presidents Bush and Obama have to say about citizenship offers insight into the good citizen in the modern era. Finally, naturalization ceremonies appear to be *the* ideal place to discuss what makes a good citizen. After all people who become naturalized citizens have to jump through a number of different hoops to fully participate in American society. They have to apply for citizenship, fill out reams of paperwork, take tests and a loyalty oath, and live through years of bureaucratic red tape to become citizens of the United States. Because these hoops and the length of time to become a citizen can be quite onerous then those who achieve citizenship must

demonstrate the ultimate perseverance. That tenacity and determination offers lessons to all natural-born Americans who may take their citizenship for granted.

Ultimately, I argue that presidents hold up naturalized citizens as the epitome of the good citizen. Presidents define immigrants as a source of renewal for American and spotlight specific individuals as romantic heroes for all Americans to learn from. This rhetoric serves as the lifeblood for the continued depth and growth of America's greatness. At the same time, presidents discuss citizenship in a one dimensional way, which circumscribes an expansive definition of citizenship and its accompanying practices. By offering such a narrow definition of citizenship presidents may undermine their ability to rhetorically maneuver on key political issues.

Presidential Rhetoric and Ideal Citizenship

Speaking at naturalization ceremonies is not a common place for presidents. In conducting this research I found only three presidents—Ford, Bush, and Obama—who addressed these ceremonies. Despite this small sample of speeches, these three presidents do offer important insights into what constitutes the good citizen. Generally, American presidents at these ceremonies assert immigration and immigrants are not to be feared but celebrated for their overcoming obstacles and accomplishments. For example, President Ford (1976a) warned that “too many Americans take our national treasures for granted. These treasures are not great cities and material achievements, but the freedom and the dignity which American philosophy accords to every American citizen . . . you can teach us many things. You can explain the real meaning of America to those who only see bad in our nation and only good in nation with other systems” (para. 7-8). Twenty five years later, President Bush (2001) noted, “Immigration is not a problem to be solved. It is a sign of a confident and successful nation . . . new arrivals should be greeted not with suspicion and resentment but with openness and courtesy” (para. 10). Five years later, Bush (2006a) noted in another address “newcomers have a special way of appreciating the opportunities of America and when they seize those opportunities, our whole nation benefits” (para. 5).

For Presidents Ford and Bush immigrants need not be feared, but greeted with “openness and courtesy” because the very act of their immigration and eventual naturalization was about breathing and living the “American philosophy.” Because naturalized immigrants go through a lengthy application process, a waiting period, take a citizenship exam, and a whole host of other obstacles they understand the “real meaning of America” and the “treasures” of being a citizen. Naturalized citizens appreciate the “freedom and dignity” much more than native born citizens. By implication, natural-born citizens can and should take lessons from naturalized immigrants such as not emphasizing the shortcoming and flaws of the United States. Instead, naturalized citizens bring verve and hunger for freedom that ordinary citizens take for granted. As such, ordinary citizens should do much more to live up to the citizenship bar established by their newly naturalized brethren. Thus, immigrating and becoming a naturalized citizen is the ultimate act of citizenship because “these men and women met their responsibilities. They have earned their citizenship” (Obama, 2010, para. 16). Natural-born citizens must do more to live up to the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen. They must do more to “earn” their citizenship.

Naturalized Immigrants as the Lifeblood of America

For Presidents Ford, Bush, and Obama immigrants do more than just earn their citizenship. They serve as the lifeblood of America. Immigrants who become citizens of the United States is one of

the primary, if not the primary reason, America has developed, maintained, and continues to exercise its great power. For these presidents, the U.S. is a nation of immigrants and immigration is its story. For example, at a naturalization ceremony in 2008, President Bush (2008) argued “immigrants have helped transform 13 small colonies into a great and growing nation of more than 300 million people. They’ve made America a melting pot of cultures from all across the world. They’ve made diversity one of the great strengths of our democracy” (para. 16). President Obama (2009) recognized that immigrants, “in the commitment you’ve shown to your adopted nation, you’re part of a larger story, America’s story” (para. 6). Immigrants have been a fundamental part to every aspect of American history. President Ford (1976b) identified immigrants in “our first century they brought the restless drive for better lives and rugged strength that cleared the wilderness, plowed the prairie, tamed the western plains, pushing into the Pacific and to Alaska” (para. 13). President Obama (2012) understood that:

Immigrants signed their names to our Declaration and helped win our independence. Immigrants helped lay the railroads and build our cities, calloused hand by calloused hand. Immigrants took up arms to preserve our Union, to defeat fascism, and to win a cold war. Immigrants and their descendants helped pioneer new industries and fuel our information age, from Google to the iPhone. So the story of immigrants isn’t a story of “them,” it’s a story of “us.” It’s who we are. And now all of you get to write the next chapter. (para. 7)

Presidents Ford, Bush, and Obama’s lionization of newly minted citizens reinforced a fundamental aspect of American immigration rhetoric. Vanessa Beasley (2006) noted there is a dialectic within American immigration rhetoric where immigrants are cast as “others” who are bringers of bad tidings. At the same time, immigrants are to be applauded for their sacrifice and hard work to make the United States what it is today. Clearly all three presidents extolled the work and sacrifice of immigrants, but it is not just work and sacrifice that make them the ideal citizens. It is the association immigrants have with the progress of American history that make naturalized citizens so important. Every milestone, every great trial, every moment of progress within American history immigrants have played a leading part. For all three presidents immigrants brought ideals that forged an American identity based upon universal values of freedom, liberty, and equality that is the envy of the world and the world attempts to emulate. Immigrants as citizens defended those values in a variety of conflicts. Immigrants have constantly pushed the United States into new boundaries whether that was geographic—the Pacific and Alaska—or industrial—Google and the iPhone. The actions of immigrants as citizens made and continue to make America a “great and growing nation.”

The net result is that naturalized citizens are the backbone of America’s exceptionalist nature. For presidents, immigrants as citizens provide a lifeblood vital to the growth and maintenance of American power. For example, President Ford (1976a) stated the United States was the “land of miracles” (para. 13). Immigrants help keep a constant flow of miracles because “transfusions of traditions and cultures, as well as of blood, have made America unique among nations and Americans a new kind of people” (Ford, 1976b, para. 14). President Bush (2001) noted, “citizenship is a defining event. In the life of our nation, new citizens bring renewal. By taking an oath, as you have done today, immigrants affirm a belief in the American creed” (para. 15). For Bush (2006a), immigrants “talent, hard work and love of freedom have helped make America the leader of the world” (para. 19). President Obama (2012) conveyed a similar

sentiment when he asserted, “immigration makes America stronger, immigration makes us more prosperous, and immigration positions America to lead in the 21st century” (para. 15). Ultimately, Obama (2013) described immigrants as bringing “new hopes and new dreams, new ideas and new optimism about our future. That will make us stronger. That’s how we’ll make sure that our best days are ahead of us and not behind us” (para. 19).

The common theme amongst Presidents Ford, Bush, and Obama is this notion of renewal. One of the fundamental tenets of American exceptionalism is the United States, unlike other nations, will never suffer the natural devolution of power that comes with all great nations. In the long arc of history America will continue to progress, prosper, and move forward becoming better tomorrow than it was today (McCrisken, 2003). That notion of constant renewal can be found in America’s Constitution where it was written into the Preamble:

We the People of the United States, in order to form a *more perfect union*, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

For the sake of American exceptionalism, the key phrase in the Preamble is a “more perfect union.” A perfect union is impossible. However, the narrative of the United States is that its citizens are constantly working to better themselves, to progress, and to offer themselves as a beacon for other nations to emulate. To continually form a “more perfect union” there is a need for constant renewal, constant progress to keep America’s exceptionalism intact. For Presidents Ford, Bush, and Obama, immigration and immigrants becoming citizens are keys to bringing about constant “transfusion” and renewal. When there is a constant flow of immigrants who want to become American citizens then there is a constant belief in the “American creed,” which for citizens is a “community of values . . . that subscribes to those principles which the Declaration of Independence proclaims and the Constitution protects—the political values of self-government, liberty and justice, equal rights, and equal opportunity” (Ford, 1976b, para. 17). Because immigrants take great pains to come to the United States to become citizens they appreciate the American creed more than others. They are more likely to teach it to their children and defend it against foreign and domestic enemies. For presidents, immigrants becoming citizens is what makes America great and creates a constant cycle of regeneration. The act of immigration and becoming citizens is the penultimate act of that greatness for it is a well-spring from where America’s exceptionalism flows, continues, strengthens and establishes the grounds for America the ability to lead well into the twenty-first century.

Romantic Heroes Exemplify and Circumscribe Citizenship

Not only are immigrants as citizens the lifeblood of America, but Presidents Bush and Obama took it one step further by highlighting the individual accomplishments of new citizens. President Reagan began the tradition of highlighting the accomplishments of individual citizens in his State of the Union addresses. Since that time presidents have used that strategy in a number of different rhetorical situations, including naturalization ceremonies. Murphy (2003) argued the strategy of showcasing individual accomplishments romanticizes these people as heroic citizens—citizens who were ordinary persons, but were extraordinary for their humility, selfless actions, and individual effort. These individuals are the ideal that all Americans should strive to be. For example, at a 2006 naturalization ceremony, President Bush (2006a) singled out

Bolivian born immigrant Veronica Pacheco for praise. Bush asserted Veronica came to the U.S. fifteen years prior, “found a job at a catering company in Virginia. Every Friday and Saturday, she spent English at the local community college. Over the years, she saved enough money to buy her own townhouse. Here’s what Veronica says about America: ‘This is a country of opportunity. If you want to be successful, you can do it. You have your dreams come true here’” (para. 10). In another naturalization address, Bush (2008) honored “Mya Soe from Burma” (para. 18). According to Bush, “Mya faced discrimination and oppression at the hands of Burma’s military junta. When he tried to teach local villagers . . . how to read and write the Shan language, the regime interrogated him and harassed him. In 2000, he left a life of fear for a life of freedom” (para. 18). These naturalized immigrants offer lessons for Americans who take their “freedom” for granted. The implied message to natural-born citizens is if these people can struggle and overcome economic hardship, discrimination, and harassment from a “military junta” then there should be no complaining from natural-born Americans who have to overcome non-life threatening problems. The “true” citizens of the United States are people who roll-up their sleeves, work hard, overcome obstacles and never stop striving for the American dream as Veronica and Mya have. In essence, President Bush reinforced the myth of rugged individualism that is embedded with immigrant narratives of overcoming great obstacles to make a better life for themselves in the United States (e.g. Theodore Roosevelt’s celebration of the pioneer immigrant in *Winning the West*, see Dorsey and Harlow, 2003).

At the same time, Bush’s showcasing these romanticized heroes undermined a more expansive definition of what might constitute citizenship. In his discourse, Bush ignored circumstances that might prevent other immigrants and citizens from getting involved in American life. He did not give any consideration to economic, social, and/or political factors that many Americans may have. According to Bush’s implied logic, all Americans have to do, natural-born or naturalized, is get out of bed in the morning, roll-up their sleeves, and get to work like Veronica Pacheco and Mya Soe. Bush rooted citizenship in the agency of individual actions rather than communal ones. It is the acts of these romantic heroes that keep America great, not the collective acts of citizenship (e.g. protests) that Americans engage in on a daily basis.

Even President Obama, who has stated Americans need to have a greater emphasis on community and becoming “my brother’s keeper,” reinforced these individual romantic heroes as being the personification of American citizenship. But Obama took this heroic immigrant citizen narrative further by only celebrating the accomplishments of military service members. At the four naturalization ceremonies Obama spoke at he only addressed a crowd where immigrant service members were going to become citizens. Obama singled out 16 different individuals, 15 service members and one ordinary citizen. For Obama, these naturalized citizen soldiers were the embodiment of the American spirit and what Americans should emulate. For example, Obama (2009) recited the story of Navy service member Jeanne Ebongue Tapo who represented the kind of character Americans should strive for. According to the president, Tapo “grew up in Gabon, Africa, the daughter of a single mother raising five children by herself. And Jeanne immigrated to the United States to provide for her family and to pursue her dream of becoming a dentist. And that’s why she joined the Navy. And she hoped she’d have the opportunity to work and see the world and also earn her education” (para. 15). In another address, Obama (2012) saluted Oluwatosin Akinduro from Nigeria who left “with the dream that we have all have destiny in life and we are all born with the resources to make a difference” (para.11). Obama (2013) praised Pertula George-Redd who “arrived from St. Lucia at the age of 23, leaving behind her parents and seven siblings” (para. 10). Ms. George-Redd studied international development

and stayed “for over a decade now, to work at non-profits that teach our kids about sustainable foods and how to live a healthier life by eating well.” Obama (2013) concluded “in each of you, we see the true spirit of America” (para. 11). For Obama, these naturalized immigrant soldiers were and are the ultimate citizen hero because they not only overcame many hardships, as other immigrants did, but they placed their lives on the line to serve and protect the United States.

One of the questions that come to mind when looking at Obama’s naturalization ceremony discourse is why would a Democratic President Obama, who is supposedly anti-military, salute more members of the armed forces than Republican President Bush? Politically it made sense because President Obama might have been attempting to neutralize and overcome the conventional wisdom that Democrats are anti-defense; particularly, in the wake of the president’s opposition to continuing the Iraq War. By celebrating these immigrant citizen heroes of the armed forces Obama demonstrated he was a new kind of Democrat; a friend to the military. The implied message was Obama would be a president for all, not just traditional Democratic groups.

More importantly, in the context of citizenship, Obama’s celebration of these citizen heroes rhetorically narrowed the boundaries of what constitutes ideal citizenship. According to Murphy (2003), enacting citizenship is not just about extolling the virtues of individual heroes. Rather, it involves the ability to gather communally in civic associations to discuss problems, how they might bring these problems to the awareness of others, and offer some solutions. It must also consist of a discussion of what are the barriers within communities that might prevent ordinary, natural-born citizens from participating. Robert Putnam (2000) made a similar argument regarding citizenship by arguing that collective practices of citizenship have been displaced in American life. According to Putnam’s research, since the 1980s there has been a severe lack of civic engagement and communal activity within the United States. At one time, according to Putnam, Americans would gather in civic and voluntary organizations where they would not only be there for purposes of socialization, but also to discuss and possibly offering solutions to local, national, and international problems. From the 1980s onward, community involvement continues to diminish, which has created a citizenry that is apathetic, cynical of political figures and politics in general, and disengaged from citizen life.

Since he took office President Obama’s discourse suggested he wanted to counteract this position of naked self-interest and apathy by arguing more Americans must become their “brother’s keeper” (see Frank, 2011). In other words, Americans needed to work together more to ensure that everyone in the United States had equal opportunities at the American Dream. In the context of citizenship, Obama’s rhetoric of “my brother’s keeper” emphasized not only individual action and practice, but communal activities as well. It says we all have a stake in each other’s lives. We all have a role to play to help one another. We should go beyond the scope of narrow self-interest and think of our local, state, and national communities as well. However, by constructing America’s service members as super-citizens who are exemplars because of their individual achievement and heroism, the president weakened his own message of “my brother’s keeper” and that ordinary Americans need to be civically engaged. By contrast, one can interpret his rhetoric that Americans do not need to worry about the lives of others. Pursuing naked self-interest is ok because others will take care of their basic civic duties. In saluting immigrants who become service members, while they may be exemplars for Americans to imitate, Obama rhetorically destabilized the agency of citizens to act in a communal way. Instead, Americans can sit at home, watch movies and play video games, be apathetic, and do not get involved. They can continue, as Putnam (2000) would put it, to “bowl alone.” In essence, President Obama, like

President Bush, constructed the “good citizen” in a one dimensional way. The *truly* good citizen is measured by individual practices and individual activities, not communal ones that might bring to light issues and problems that can be addressed by Americans as a whole.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I have attempted to define how presidents constitute the good citizen, particularly as it relates to the newly naturalized immigrants. For Presidents Ford, Bush, and Obama, the act of naturalization is the ultimate act of citizenship. Naturalized citizens appreciate the gifts of American society—freedom, equality, possibility of upward mobility no matter your background—more than their natural-born counterparts who take those items for granted. These newcomers offer lessons to “ordinary” Americans regarding what they need to do if they truly want to achieve the American dream, while serving as the lifeblood of American power. However, this focus on the accomplishments of individuals circumscribes the boundaries of citizenship. Only solitary individuals, not the activities of the community, are defined as good citizenship. In doing so, this rhetoric may undercut the larger policy goals of presidents because they cannot leverage the power of the community to obtain passage of important legislation or influence specific policymakers.

Ultimately, the rhetoric of the good citizen does provide the potential for rhetorical groundwork to be done when presidents are advocating on issues regarding citizenship, such as reforming America’s immigration system. Yet because the boundaries of what defines the good citizen are narrowed it potentially undermines communal aspects of citizenship from being recognized, heard, and being able to participate in the U.S. political system.

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