

# POLITICO

Is Newt as smart as he thinks?

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Newt Gingrich is always on message about one thing: He's not just smart, he's a deep-thinking intellectual with the big ideas to set the country right.

Leading conservative intellectuals who spend their days discussing big ideas aren't as convinced.

They don't doubt he's smart. They just doubt he's as smart as he thinks he is.

Gingrich is interested in ideas and at his best has been highly skilled marketer of them — as when he distilled decades of conservative thought into the “Contract with America” in 1994. But as he surges in the 2012 polls on the strength of professorial debate performances, some skeptics on the academic and think tank right say that the former speaker's showy intellectualism and endless reservoir of obscure historical trivia are not the same as being an original or rigorous thinker.

To the Cato Institute's David Boaz, Gingrich doesn't merit that description: The former House speaker doesn't meet Boaz's definition because he doesn't drill down on ideas, integrate them into a larger philosophy or bat them around with peers.

“He strikes me as a guy who thinks of lots of ideas and never runs them through a sanity test before spilling them on a stage,” Boaz said. “I think he has had a tendency to just have idle thoughts occur to him as he's reading the newspaper and then announce them without even running it by a colleague.”

That's a common view in the conservative academy: Gingrich is more idea impresario than idea generator, a bright and savvy politician who uses a facade of deep intellectualism effectively — but not authentically.

“Nobody thinks of Gingrich as a wonky type. Nobody thinks of him as someone who has serious positions, white papers, policies on a wide array of issues coming from deep knowledge and experience,” said Roderick Hills Jr., a constitutional law professor at New York University who's active in the conservative Federalist Society. “I don't think of him that way, and I don't know of any professor who thinks of him that way.”

Lee Edwards, distinguished fellow in conservative thought at The Heritage Foundation, argues that's the wrong standard to apply. Gingrich may not be the kind of intellectual who comes up with many of his own original ideas, but he plays an important role in drawing from and promoting them.

“He may not be as deep a thinker as Russell Kirk or an F.A. Hayek or Richard Weaver, but certainly I’d say he’s as intelligent and as thoughtful as any politician who comes along,” Edwards said. “I haven’t read one of his more recent books, but I think he pays proper attention to and gives credit to all the right people in the conservative movement.”

Of course, Gingrich doesn’t have much competition on that front, said Fred Siegel, a scholar at the conservative Manhattan Institute, who scoffed at the idea that the former House speaker has much substance.

“The intellectual level of debate in the Senate and the House is very low, and it’s in that context that Gingrich comes off as more profound than he really is,” Siegel said. “He is the tallest building in Wichita.”

Siegel sees the gap between that reality and Gingrich’s impression of his own talents as a large reason for why he’s had trouble in both the political and government arenas over the years: Convinced of the ingenuity of his ideas, he’ll overlook details, contradictory evidence and practical reality.

“He has the sense of himself of being so smart he often doesn’t see what’s 2 feet in front of him,” Siegel said.

In a year in which Republican presidential candidates have been dismissing the need for deep policy knowledge and appealing to the anti-intellectual strain of their party base, Gingrich stands out. If elected, he’d be only the second president in history with a Ph.D. He wrote a dissertation on the Belgian education system in the colonial Congo and was teaching at West Georgia College before his focus on his first two failed congressional runs in the 1970s got him denied tenure, and he quit.

Elected to the House in 1978, Gingrich’s political career has been marked by attempts to meld big ideas with the political process in ways that have gotten him tagged as both pompous and profound. He is author or co-author of 21 books that include fanciful policy explorations, alternate-history novels, a self-help book and an environmental treatise he co-authored with the former director of the Atlanta Zoo.

That’s a staggering total for a professional author, let alone someone with a day job. And though Gingrich has engaged in his share of intellectual meanderings in the books, he’s also used them as an engine for building up both the ideas he finds appealing and the momentum to get them wider support. He’s linked these with efforts like the Conservative Opportunity Society, the group of emboldened young congressmen he founded in the early 1980s to start talking welfare reform —13 years before Bill Clinton signed many of those changes into law.

And he’s always distinguished with his insight into the future of technology, long before he realized that his presence on Facebook and Twitter could be as powerful in the 2012 campaign as the heavier early state travel schedule he’s avoided.

As Weekly Standard editor Andrew Ferguson wrote in the New York Times after reading through the whole Gingrich library over the summer, “Gingrich has called some and missed some. In 1984, he saw more clearly than most that computers would touch every aspect of commercial and private life, but nobody any longer wants to build ‘a large array of mirrors [that] could affect the earth’s climate,’ warming it up so farmers could extend the growing season.”

But for all that success, rarely have any of Gingrich’s books or ideas been discussed as intellectual works outside their political context.

Gingrich’s intellect “can be good in that it makes you a serious person — he can talk about all the problems we face and put them in context, down into the weeds,” said Dr. Yuval Levin, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center who was executive director of George W. Bush’s bioethics council and worked briefly for Gingrich during his time as speaker in the 1990s. “It can be bad just in that there are times for a politician when knowing too much leads you to say too much.”

“He’s a guy who thinks in paragraphs, and when you only have time to say one sentence, you don’t always pick the right sentence,” Levin added.

And their perception of the level of Gingrich’s depth has many conservative intellectuals concerned with how he’d perform as president.

“There’s a difference between intelligence and wisdom. And you’re looking for a president to have wisdom,” said Marvin Olasky, the World Magazine editor in chief who collaborated with Gingrich in the ’90s. “Wisdom is knowing the difference between good and bad ideas. Newt is very intelligent; he has lots of ideas. But I’m not sure he always distinguishes between good and bad.”

Just look at history, Olasky said: Many men who might not have been able to match Gingrich’s Mensa score succeeded in the White House in ways that stymied smarter presidents.

“Woodrow Wilson was probably much smarter than Harry Truman, but I think Harry Truman was a better president,” Olasky said, comparing the most recent commander in chief with a doctorate to the most recent one who never made it much past high school.

Gingrich may be trying to make the 2012 election about who can think deepest, but those who do it for a living suggest that’s the wrong way to choose a president.

Charles Murray, the libertarian scholar behind “The Bell Curve” and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said that, for his tastes, Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower possessed what he called “the right degree of intelligence” for the White House.

Citing Gingrich's tendency "to have eight ideas a day, though only one of them will be good," Murray said he's reminded of the line from the ancient Greek poet, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

"And I say that with a certain amount of admiration, because Clinton too was really quick and fast off the mark. But in terms of being president, I think there's a benefit to being a hedgehog," Murray said.

Gingrich had a different take when asked after a speech at Harvard last week what role he thought his intelligence plays in his candidacy.

"Well, it's nice to have a president who knows that there aren't 57 states. It would be good to have a president who knows that Hawaii is in the Pacific and not in Asia," Gingrich said. "I don't think it hurts to have a president who is reasonably smart."

He referred to articles using "various phrases about smartest guy in the room" to describe his debate performances. Whether he agreed with that assessment, though, Gingrich said, "I'll let you decide that. I was simply quoting the news media."

Charles Fried, a respected conservative Harvard law professor who served as solicitor general under Reagan, has already decided.

Is Gingrich as deep and smart as he thinks he is?

"I don't think anybody can be that smart," Fried said.