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Is Rick Perry dumb?

By: [Jonathan Martin](#)
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Another Texas governor who drops his “g’ s” and scorns elites is [running for president](#)¹ and the whispers are the same: lightweight, incurious, instinctual.

Strip away the euphemisms and [Rick Perry](#)² is confronting an unavoidable question: Is he dumb — or just “misunderestimated?”

Doubts about Perry’s intellect have hounded him since he was first elected as a state legislator nearly three decades ago. In Austin, he’s been derided as a right-place, right-time pol who looks the part but isn’t so deep — “Gov. Goodhair.” Now, with the chatter picking back up [among his enemies](#)³ and taking flight in elite Republican circles, the rap threatens to follow him to the national stage.

“He’s like Bush only without the brains,” cracked one former Republican governor who knows Perry, repeating a joke that has made the rounds.

The Texan’s loyalists reject the suggestion, asserting that it owes to political bias and sour grapes, but Perry himself seems to welcome the low bar. He cracked on the campaign trail earlier this month that the [difference between him and Bush](#)⁴ was that he went to Texas A&M and the former president attended Yale.

But conversations with both Perry admirers and critics reveal a more complicated assessment about the mind of a politician who has never lost an election — and ranks

as the longest-serving governor in Texas history.

He is not an ideas man. Perry hasn’t spent his political career marking up the latest Cato or Heritage white papers or reading policy-heavy books late into the night. Advisers and colleagues have informed much of his thinking over the years.

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“He’s not a guy who’s going to go up to the Aspen Institute,” said longtime Texas lobbyist Bill Miller, a Perry fan. “It’s not the way he’s made.”

Miller said Perry learns what is necessary to be effective.

“If he should know about John Locke, he’ll know about John Locke,” Miller said. “If it’s not on his schedule, it’s irrelevant to him.”

China policy, for example, has surely not been much on Perry’s mind during his time in Austin.

And that showed during an interview last week with Laura Ingraham, in which he responded to a question about whether a rising China is good for the United States with platitudes that prompted the conservative talk show host to complain that he was only offering “broad generalities.”

He likely won’t make that mistake again.

In an illustration that Perry knows what he needs to know, his spokesman said the governor is currently reading Henry Kissinger’s recent China book — “On China.”

And that’s not the only practical guide the governor is thumbing through.

Mark Miner, the spokesman, said Perry is also reading Charles Stanley’s “Turning the Tide,” a Baptist pastor’s how-to for Christian conservatives who want to change the country’s direction, and the Bible. Perry

also carries an Apple laptop as well as an iPad with him on the road, said Miner, who called his boss “an avid reader.”

Perry’s own tome last year — a jeremiad against the federal government called “Fed Up!” — included 19 pages of source notes and no co-author. But in the book’s acknowledgments, the governor cites five

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individuals who helped with the writing, research and editing. One individual, former congressional aide and assistant U. S. Attorney Chip Roy, is credited as having “devoted himself full time to the completion of the original manuscript” — something Perry cites as imperative during a time when he was running for reelection.

Asked if the governor wrote “Fed Up,” Miner said: “It’s his book.”

The spokesman added: “There were people that helped out along the way, but it came from him.”

More broadly, Miner said criticism of Perry as not-so-swift could be traced to bitter political opponents.

“And they’re at home now watching re-runs of CSI: Miami,” he jabbed.

Perry may not be a wonk, but that doesn’t mean he’s a rube — a costly mistake many of his foes have made.

His policy focus as governor hasn’t been complex — it’s almost entirely jobs and business-focused — but that’s not where Perry’s mind is, say those who know him.

He’s a power politician and a very canny one. And what seems to animate him is competition.

Whether it is winning elections, beating out other states in attracting jobs or besting them for college football recruits, Perry is ferociously single-minded.

“This is like judging [baseball star] David Ortiz as a failed athlete because he’s never scored a touchdown,” said Democratic Texas state Rep. Mike Villarreal, alluding to the Perry-is-dull charge. “He’s a focused, committed and skilled political animal. He wins elections. Do not underestimate him.”

Dave McNeely, a Texas political columnist

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who has covered Austin since 1963, differentiated between Perry's skill set.

"In terms of sheer brains and understanding policy at a deep level, he'd rank pretty low," said McNeely, looking back at the chief executives he's covered from John Connally on. "But as far as power politics and control, he's the most powerful Texas governor in history."

From what was historically designed to be a weak governorship, Perry has bent state government entirely to his will during a decade in office. He dominates the Legislature, has effectively taken over Texas's expansive public university system and is relentless in his search for conquest.

Perry's contemporary to the east, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, recounted a phone call he got from the Texan about an article in a business magazine outlining the tax incentives Louisiana had put in place to lure digital media businesses.

"He knew the nuances of what we had done and called to congratulate me but also to see what Texas could do to be competitive with us," Jindal said.

Jindal, who has not yet endorsed a presidential candidate, also recalled being at a private meeting and hearing Perry detail to Texas businessmen the ways in which Louisiana had become more attractive to the film industry.

"He'll know in detail what Louisiana has done and then push Texas to be more competitive," said the Louisianan, who

dismisses questions about Perry's intellect as elitism from those who only like Republicans that "either raise taxes or lose elections."

Those who remember Perry from his days as a conservative Democrat in the state House say he was likable and ambitious — but not considered a thinker.

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“He was not known as a particularly bright guy,” recalled Democratic strategist Paul Begala, who worked in Austin at the time. “But he was really charming and clearly a political talent.”

“There were some guys we always thought were the brainiacs, the ones who got into the minutiae of legislation,” recalled Cliff Johnson, an Austin lobbyist and close Perry friend and former roommate from their days serving together as Democratic legislators. “We sought information from trusted folks.”

For Perry and Johnson, their go-to egghead was Ric Williamson, another Democrat from the class of '84 who was a force in the Legislature and went on to become chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission before dying of a heart attack in 2007.

“He smoked a pipe and stayed up late reading everything,” Johnson recalled of Williamson.

After Perry left the state House in 1990 and became agricultural commissioner and then lieutenant governor, he still looked to his former classmate for intellectual guidance.

“Ric Williamson laid out the matrix for how Rick should think about policy and issues,” said a Texas source who has known Perry and watched him for the past 15 years.

Combined with strategy advice from Karl Rove, his first top political adviser, and then Dave Carney, his current guru, Perry

has been well-served over the years — as he’s acknowledged.

“If Karl Rove hadn’t been my consultant, I would not have been agriculture commissioner today,” Perry told the Dallas Morning News in 1994, adding: “My brain is like a chicken pot pie. His is like a refrigerator that is all very organized —

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pickles here, salad there.”

Perry has such total trust in Carney that he let the veteran political consultant bring in a group of academics to run experiments in his 2006 reelection about what does and doesn't work in modern campaigns.

Well before his ascent to power, though, the Texan was learning the value of taking and rigorously following instruction.

Trained as an Air Force pilot right out of A&M, Perry was “taught to trust your information,” Johnson said.

And associates say the same lessons that Perry learned when he was flying C-130s apply now.

“Pilots execute flight plans,” Miller said. “They have a plan, they fly a certain pattern and that's the way he's always operated — he has a flight plan for what he's trying to do and he executes.”

Mike Baselice, Perry's longtime pollster, said his client is of the Ronald Reagan school of management: “Trust people and manage well.”

“His job is to go meet voters,” Baselice said. “We'll figure out the details of the messaging.”

But the pollster hastened to add that Perry does care about issues and described an attentive student of polling data.

“He sits in the front row when we go through [surveys],” Baselice said. “He asks

questions. But when we come to a decision about what we're going to use, he's on-message.”

As governor, Perry is almost always surrounded by a group of aides and advisers.

Garnet Coleman, a veteran Democratic

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legislator, said when he'd met with then-Gov. Bush it would frequently be just the two of them.

"There was nobody in room until he had an assignment for something we were working on," Coleman said.

With Perry, the Democrat recalled going to meet with him about a children's health issue and finding ten people in the office.

"There just wasn't much of a discussion," Coleman said about the sit-down. "For the most part, he just thanked me for visiting."

A Perry aide dismissed such criticism, noting that the governor reads every bill that reaches his desk and arguing that he's "very engaged with staff and legislators on policy."

Johnson said his old friend's reliance on advisers was an asset, not a drawback.

"If he doesn't know the answer, he's going to find someone who does," the lobbyist said. "He recognizes good help and brings 'em on for advice. He's not going to know every foreign leader — but he has the good sense and instincts to pick good people who help him make good decisions."

The mistake, Johnson said, is to infer weakness from Perry's style.

"The political graveyard in Texas is buried full of people who have underestimated Rick Perry," he said. "We had a U.S. senator who did that and she didn't even make the run-off. Sooner or later, they're

going to figure out that he's not just lucky, he's good."

Molly Ball contributed to this report.

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