

## Turn Political Mudslinging into Tasty Educational Treats: Incorporating Political Campaigns into Psychology Courses



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Every four years in the United States, the framers of the U.S. Constitution provide a gift to psychology teachers – the presidential campaign and election. The presidential election provides numerous opportunities for teachers who appreciate the utility of using real world events to improve students' understanding of psychological concepts in a wide variety of courses. The paragraphs that follow contain ideas for illustrative examples, classroom discussions, assignments, activities, and mini-experiments that incorporate the presidential campaign and election into psychology courses.

### Source Characteristics

A fundamental aspect of any political campaign is the candidate. Some of the variables that appear to be moderately associated with leadership success include (in no particular order): charisma, a desire for power and dominance, self-confidence, self-direction, morality, and intelligence (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Students could be asked to make predictions about which personality traits and constructs might predict voter preferences for certain candidates or issues. This could then be followed by an assignment to review the research literature on personality traits and voting preferences. Additionally, the intense media exposure of candidates' lives provides fertile ground for personality assessments of the candidates. A case study assignment of current or past presidential candidates would certainly prove interesting to students and instructors alike. The results of any of these assignments could then be contrasted with research suggesting that only three personal attributes of U.S. presidents have been shown to predict effectiveness in office (as rated by historians): height, family size, and the number of books published prior to taking office (Simonton, 1987).

In recent years, voters have been increasingly more likely to receive information about a candidate from advocacy groups (e.g., MoveOn.org, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth), political pundits (e.g., Al Franken, Bill O'Reilly), political provocateurs (e.g., Michael Moore), and comedy shows (e.g., The Daily Show) than from the candidates themselves. Thus, a discussion of the partisan nature of such "news" sources can provide an excellent opportunity to enhance a critical thinking discussion. Finally, the role of the traditional mass media in influencing the perceptions of candidates and their policies as well as affecting the importance of different issues in voters' minds could spark a healthy discussion. A class could discuss the evidence surrounding the "vast right-wing conspiracy" or the "liberal bias" among traditional news sources. For example, the recent film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (Greenwald, 2004) contains a number of techniques that the filmmaker suggests are used by the Fox News channel to influence viewers, thus the film might help to initiate a lively discussion about the media's position in presidential politics.

### Message Characteristics

The most obvious means by which the presidential campaign can be incorporated into psychology courses involves the "packaging of the presidency." Indeed, an enormous amount of time and money is devoted to making the candidate appeal to as many voters as possible (Jamieson, 1996; Jamieson & Waldman, 2001). Instructors might find the presidential campaign particularly amenable to teaching the social psychological topic of attitudes and persuasion. Attitudes toward the candidates or the political parties could be used to illustrate the structure and functions of attitudes. A discussion of which attitude components (i.e., affective, behavioral, and cognitive) are stronger in political attitudes and what functions (e.g., social acceptance, value-expressive, utilitarian) are best served by political attitudes would be thought-provoking. For example, in an intriguing application of terror management theory, researchers found that, compared to a control group, participants forced to examine their own mortality (e.g., reminded of 9/11) were more likely to support President George W. Bush (Landau et al., 2004). It may be informative to have students assess the degree to which these research findings are being utilized in the Bush re-election campaign.

The consistency between attitudes toward candidates or other political issues and political behaviors like voting, volunteering, or donating money would serve as an effective framework for the issue of attitude-behavior

consistency. For the topic of persuasion, assignments could be constructed in which students identify and analyze the persuasion techniques (e.g., humor, fear) used in convention speeches, political television advertisements, and debates. Numerous videotapes exist of past campaign ads and debates. MoveOn.org has a series of 30 second anti-Bush ads available for a nominal fee. In addition, candidate, party, and advocacy group web sites contain numerous examples of such material via video streaming.

The area of social cognition is also ripe for integration of election material. For example, a lecture on social identity theory can be augmented by discussing the impact of incorporating political ideology into one's sense of identity – such as examples of candidates and supporters using enmity to devalue the outgroup (i.e., democrat, republican) relative to their ingroup (e.g., Krugman, 2004). Numerous examples of ingroup/outgroup biases, illusory correlations, confirmation biases, and belief perseverance effects exist in the statements made by the candidates and their supporters during interviews, press releases, and television ads – many of which are readily available on candidate, party, or advocacy group web sites. To further illustrate this process, it would be useful to have students identify the different stereotypes used by the candidates to define themselves and their opponents (e.g., flip-flopper, Texas gunslinger, Massachusetts liberal, compassionate conservative). Students could brainstorm ideas about how prejudices might impact the presidential campaign. In addition to provoking thought about the crucial role of gender, race, sexual preference, and religion in our society, this activity could potentially improve students' understanding of concepts like symbolic racism via an identification of political symbols (e.g., the Willie Horton television advertisement or the gay marriage issue) in presidential campaigns (Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980).

To illustrate motivated reasoning processes (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), the biased processing of campaign information by political partisans, an instructor might conduct an in-class study by having students report their candidate preferences before watching a presidential debate and then having them evaluate the debaters immediately afterwards. Research suggests that those with pre-debate preferences will evaluate the debate in a way that confirms their preferences and might even report strengthening their preferences after the debate (Munro, Ditto, Lockhart, Fagerlin, Gready, & Peterson, 2002). Motivated reasoning processes are not limited to debate evaluations, students could analyze campaign statements and information to identify other examples of motivated reasoning processes. For example, some politicians are adept at using the self-serving bias, taking responsibility for successes (e.g., economic upturns) but placing blame elsewhere for failures (e.g., economic recessions). Additionally, partisans are skilled at molding historical information, like John Kerry's military service in Vietnam, to fit their political worldview (e.g., Hulsizer, Munro, Fagerlin, & Taylor 2004). Another reasoning bias that is likely to play out this year in what promises to be a close election is the hindsight bias (Powell, 1988). Mini-experiments assessing students' pre-election predictions and confidence ratings and their post-election recollections might prove a fitting example of the hindsight bias.

### Target Group Characteristics

One key element of political campaigns is delivering a message that resonates with a target group. Whether it is energizing the traditional base of a political party, reaching out to new groups of constituents, or encouraging young adults to vote, political campaigns rise and fall with their ability to get people involved and willing to vote. The goal of developing a message that appeals to as many people as possible often begins by discovering the issues that matter to most voters. Political polling is a topic well-suited for use when discussing research methods. Students could, for example, conduct an analysis of the wording of the stems and response options used by different polls. Of course, the sampling techniques used by polling agencies can also be critically analyzed. Polls often report results for "registered voters" or "likely voters", so students could evaluate the representativeness of these samples. This would be especially interesting in light of famous polling mistakes like the "Dewey defeats Truman" headline and the premature calls of the Florida vote in 2000. Given the tendency of polling agencies to survey land-line telephones versus cell phones (Breslin, 2004) one can only wonder if the same issues will arise in 2004. Finally, the margin of error included in poll results livens a discussion of confidence intervals.

An interesting discussion can also be structured around the difficulty candidates have tapping into young voters. Instructors might encourage students to speculate why this population is particularly difficult to reach and then offer suggestions, using psychological principles and techniques, to increase young voter turnout. For example, students might utilize Cialdini's (2001) compliance principles, reference cognitive dissonance, or discuss the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion when developing a strategy

to encourage voting behavior among young adults.

### Conclusion

Incorporating current political campaigns into the classroom provides a unique opportunity to increase the salience and relevance of many of the psychological theories and research programs discussed in a wide variety of courses. Although there are clear benefits to enhancing lectures with examples from the current presidential campaign, there are dangers. Instructors need to be cognizant that students may not share their political beliefs. Consequently, it is important to create a non-threatening classroom environment for all students but especially for those who might be in the political minority. Teaching will be most effective when students, regardless of their political affiliations, pursue the application of psychological concepts to all candidates and all political parties rather than seeking to portray one candidate or one party in a negative light and another in a positive light. In a non-threatening classroom, the potential benefits of infusing political campaign discussions into the classroom are numerous. First, students are more likely to understand concepts when they can readily see the applications of these ideas in a real world setting. Second, navigating the political landscape of a presidential campaign offers important lessons on the value of being a critical consumer of information. Finally, young adults tend to be one of the least likely groups to vote. Consequently, discussing currently political campaigns may increase civic engagement for students.

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### Related Resources

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# Newsletter of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology



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## President-Elect's Message William Addison



Although I am very enthusiastic about the opportunity to serve as STP's President in 2005, I must admit to some apprehension regarding the prospect of following in the large footsteps of 2004 President Barney Beins and his predecessors. Thanks to the outstanding work of Beins et al., as well as the significant contributions of our dedicated officers and committee/task force members, our organization has made remarkable progress during the last decade. We have grown from a relatively somnolent division with a small budget allocated primarily to support our program at the annual APA convention, to a politically savvy (and active), semi-independent Society with nearly half a million dollars in assets! The Society still maintains a strong presence at the APA convention, but we are also involved in a significant number of other activities in support of our mission, including programming at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Society (APS), the "Best Practices" conferences, the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP), Instructional Resource Awards (IRAs), and our consulting and mentoring services. And the fact is that virtually all of these activities have been initiated during the past 10 years. Clearly, as an organization, we have established ourselves as a genuine "player" in the teaching and learning of psychology.

In light of this extraordinary progress, my primary goal as President is simply to continue the excellent work of my predecessors. In particular, I plan to maintain the Society's emphasis on scholarly work in teaching, with the ultimate goal of making the scholarship of teaching more visible as a legitimate research endeavor. One can point to the professional contributions of such luminaries as Charles Brewer, Jane Halonen, Diane Halpern, and Dave Johnson, Past-Presidents all, as evidence that scholarly work in pedagogy is more visible now than it has been at any time during the history of our organization; yet we still have much work to do to convince those outside of our family of 3000 that research on teaching constitutes an authentic professional activity.

In addition to publishing the preeminent pedagogical journal in any discipline (a big thanks to Randy Smith), we can address this goal by expanding our already productive efforts in the publication of articles and books in electronic form. No doubt many of you are familiar with the acclaimed *Essays from Excellence in Teaching (EET)*, insightful commentaries dealing with a variety of issues faced by psychology teachers at multiple levels of instruction. As I write this, Volume III has recently been published and work on Volume IV is underway. A forthcoming offering will address some of the more salient issues that graduate students need to consider as they seek academic positions, a work co-edited by Bill Buskist, Vinny Hevern, and Barney Beins. Plans are also underway to create a volume called *Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography*, in which veteran teachers will provide guidance to new psychology teachers on a variety of topics.

Another goal I have for 2005 is to make STP more accessible to a broader range of psychology teachers. In particular, I would like to see greater participation in the Society's activities by members of under-represented groups. As we consider the profile of STP membership in the 21st century, it is essential that our organization reflect the increasing ethnic and racial diversity that we see in our students and colleagues.

Also in terms of "representativeness," I would like to see the Society increase our efforts to involve all psychology teachers in our work. Given the dramatic growth of psychology at the high school and 2-year college levels in the last 10 years, I believe we need to continue to promote partnerships that involve these teachers, as well as to develop new opportunities for

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collaboration. In support of this goal, I plan to establish task forces whose charge it will be to explore additional opportunities for collaboration with APS and PT@CC (Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges), the newest organization of psychology teachers. Similarly, we will continue to work closely with TOPSS (Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools), a group whose energy and creativity virtually guarantees success for any projects we pursue together.

In support of these efforts to promote collaboration, we (i.e., Tom Pusateri, our hard-working Executive Director) have already begun work on creating an STP membership directory that will make it easier for our members to contact each other with the goal of pursuing collaborative projects. I also hope to establish a grant program designed to facilitate cooperative activities among psychology teachers, particularly those activities that involve teachers from different types of institutions and settings. For example, I would like to see funds made available to support meetings of psychology teachers from 4-year colleges and 2-year colleges in the same region. Such meetings would be useful for addressing such common issues as curriculum development, articulation of psychology courses across institutions, etc.

In a general sense, my goals for the Society are twofold: 1) to honor the outstanding tradition established by past Presidents, and 2) to foster innovative ideas about making STP more accessible to all psychology teachers. Thus my Presidential theme is simply, "Honoring Tradition, Fostering Innovation." As I indicated in my remarks at STP's Executive Committee meeting in Honolulu, this theme seems sufficiently vague to provide maximum flexibility to those of you who may be considering 2005 APA convention submissions or grant proposals that address the Presidential theme.

Working closely with Executive Director Tom Pusateri, my predecessor Barney Beins, and my successor Mary Kite, as well as the rest of the "movers and shakers" in STP (you know who you are), I hope to have an active and productive year in support of the Society. If you would like to become one of the Society's movers and shakers, just let me know and I'll see what I can do to help you get more involved. And please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any ideas or suggestions that will help us move the Society forward as we continue to serve the needs of psychology teachers.