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## The Forum: Second Thoughts On Presidential Politics

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## The Forum: Second Thoughts on Presidential Politics

Janet M. Ruane<sup>1</sup> and Karen A. Cerulo<sup>2</sup>

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*In this essay, we confront the “conventional wisdoms” promoted throughout this long presidential campaign. By conventional wisdoms, we mean the common knowledge of politics—the things that commentators and analysts forward as taken-for-granted assertions and beliefs. We will revisit just a few of the campaign season’s conventional wisdoms and review them with a sociological eye. In so doing, we find that in politics, as in most other areas, conventional wisdom can be a risky source of knowledge.*

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**KEY WORDS:** campaigns; conventional wisdom; cultural practices; elections; politics; social patterns.

### INTRODUCTION

Another campaign cycle—one of the longest in U.S. history—has drawn to an end. The months (actually, the years) of speculation and “punditing,” of inspiration and gaffs, of handshaking, shot drinking, and bowling are over ... for now.

The dust has settled and we thought it would be valuable to look at some of the “conventional wisdoms” promoted throughout this long campaign.<sup>3</sup> By conventional wisdoms, we mean the common knowledge of politics—the things that every commentator and analyst forward as taken-for-granted assertions and beliefs. We will revisit just a few of the campaign season’s conventional wisdoms and review them with a sociological eye. (We’ve actually made quite a practice of this; see Ruane and Cerulo,

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<sup>3</sup> *Sociological Forum* has published several pieces on voting over the past year (see, e.g., Fullerton and Borch, 2008; Peoples, 2008), but we take a somewhat different approach here.

2008.) In so doing, we find that in politics, as in most other areas, conventional wisdom can be a risky source of knowledge.

For example ...

### *Conventional Wisdom Tells Us ... Flip-Floppers are Doomed*

Flip-flopping refers to an apparent, often sudden, change of position on a matter of political relevance. The practice, it is said, has been the downfall of many a presidential contender. When George H. W. Bush flip-flopped from “read my lips: no new taxes” to requesting “tax revenue increases” from Congress in June 1989, he made a shift that many feel cost him the 1992 election. In 2004, John Kerry claimed, “I was for the 67 billion dollar tax cut before I opposed it.” He was quickly dubbed the king of flip-floppers. Hillary Clinton’s shifting position on the Iraq War was a change that many voters saw as strictly opportunistic.

Clearly, flip-flopping cost these candidates and it has become a part of their legacy. However, other famous flip-floppers seem untouched by the practice. Indeed, some of the most notable flip-flops of our time have actually benefited their authors. David Mastio (2006) notes:

While Ronald Reagan was famous for his tax cuts, after his big success, he spent the rest of his presidency raising taxes—the public didn’t seem to hold it against him. The same can be said for Reagan’s relations with the Evil Empire when he set his rhetoric aside to strike agreements with the Soviets that would have made Nixon, or for that matter, Carter proud. Closer to our time, our current President Bush ran just on the respective side of isolationism—vowing never to get involved in such silly things as nation-building, yet after 9/11 when Afghanistan was in need of rebuilding, Bush didn’t bat an eye and the public didn’t care.

So when is flip-flopping lethal and when can it actually help? We argue that productive flip-flopping is patterned, and those patterns can be linked to several social factors.

First, the effect of a flip-flop is contingent on social context. In times of serious social disruption, for example, flip-flopping can be beneficial. When times get rough, voters often welcome changes in position, especially changes that suggest bold leadership. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin (2005) tells us that Lincoln regularly reexamined his positions when faced with turmoil or potential disaster. During the Civil War, he reversed himself frequently when his original plans went awry. (The dismissal of General McClellan is one famous example; Lincoln’s position on slavery is another.) Rather than “staying the course,” Lincoln searched for the winning course. For him, flip-flopping was about sensible reassessment, not political expediency. One might say the same of Ronald Reagan’s

changing strategy toward the Soviet Union or George W. Bush's entry onto the global stage. No one would have championed a president's isolationist rigidity in the face of the fresh, dynamic leadership of Gorbachev or the devastation rendered by the 9/11 attacks.

There are other social contexts relevant to effective or ineffective flip-flopping. Campaign seasons provide a case in point. If one has flip-flopped for the sole benefit of winning a race, voters can easily take offense. In such cases, change is viewed as self-serving rather than considered. So, did Mike Huckabee really change his mind on the success of the Iraq surge? Did John Edwards and Hilary Clinton really become anti-war? Did Rudy Giuliani really change his feelings on immigration? In the final analysis, voters were not convinced. Expediency can be harshly judged, a lesson Merton (1938) taught us long ago.

Flip-flopping is socially patterned; it also appears quite norm regulated. For example, flip-flopping has frequency norms—it must be done in moderation.<sup>4</sup> When people act as “serial flip-floppers,” their credibility is severely damaged. Mitt Romney suffered this fate in the 2008 primaries after changing his positions on abortion, gay rights, gun control, campaign finance, and immigration (just to name a few). The same charges followed Howard Dean in his 2004 bid for the presidency. Dean was accused of flip-flopping on policies toward North Korea, the retirement age, public financing and campaign spending, regime change in Iraq, trade with Cuba, the death penalty, the Bush tax cuts, and more.

The moderation norm is related to another pattern: what we might call flip-flopping concentration. The ratio of flip-flops to stability over time seems to influence voter reaction to the change. In the 2008 Republican primaries, for example, several contenders tried to make the flip-flopper label stick to John McCain, but McCain was saved by his long congressional career and the fact that, when one reviewed his record as a whole, his changing positions were few and far between.

The direction of one's flip-flops matter as well. When voters see a politician flip-flop from popular to unpopular positions, voters often view the change as sincere. For example, when LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (contradicting some of his earlier positions), most voters believed his change of heart was genuine. Recall that Johnson was “a white politician, who'd come of age in Jim Crow Texas and had been a sometimes segregationist in the Senate; [he] knew he was sacrificing his party's domination in the South by traveling the civil rights path” (Darmon, 2008). Under these circumstances, it would be hard to define Johnson's flip-flop

<sup>4</sup> Tittle and Paternoster (2000) identify the top 10 norms of U.S. middle-class culture. Moderation, which they equate with Emerson's golden mean, is Number 7 on their list of “dominant” norms.

as pandering. Similarly, Barry Goldwater, the epitome of right-wing conservatism, later embraced many positions that some described as ultra liberal. (He was especially critical of the growing political power of the religious right.) When Goldwater flip-flopped on the very views he helped to establish, voters saw him as brave, not insincere.

On the other hand, if a politician suddenly changes a position in order to accommodate a self-interest, a special interest group, or a popular trend, accusations of pandering are sure to follow. Barack Obama was loudly criticized for flip-flopping on public campaign financing. Voters felt it was the size of his war chest relative to John McCain's, and not his heartfelt beliefs, that fueled the decision. Both Obama and McCain were dissed for embracing offshore drilling—flip-flops from earlier positions. Many believed this change of heart was merely a political tactic, one designed to garner the support of disgruntled Americans facing escalating fuel costs.

Finally, reactions to flip-flopping can be linked to the centrality of the issue. Thus, Hillary Clinton's changing position on Iraq troubled voters much more than her fluid position on issuing driver's licenses to immigrants. Similarly, Obama's change of heart on FISA drew far less attention than his suggestion that an Iraq withdrawal might take longer than 16 months. For flip-flops to make real noise, they have to be performed in the center ring.

### *Conventional Wisdom Says Tells Us ... Voters Like the "Common Man"*

John Edwards declared his candidacy in blue jeans and a work shirt. McCain donned comfortable sweaters and baseball caps at his town hall meetings. Is it any wonder? In 2000, voters characterized Al Gore as aloof and elitist while they spoke of George Bush as the guy with whom they'd like to share a beer. Similar comparisons peppered the 2004 Kerry/Bush contest. This, no doubt, explains why the two 2008 Democratic finalists—Obama and Clinton—nearly tripped one another on their way to Pennsylvania bars. Doing shots and beers with the locals was considered the way to voters' hearts.

Conventional wisdom tells us that voters love the commoner, but when we look to history, research shows that our presidents seldom have common roots. Of the 18 presidents who served since 1900, only six can be described as hailing from modest backgrounds: Hoover, Truman, LBJ, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton. Of these six, all but Truman quickly shed their "everyman" histories, entering the White House with college degrees and generous bank accounts. Harry Truman was the *only* modern

president who failed to earn a college degree. He struggled in business (recall that his haberdashery went bankrupt), and he enjoyed only modest political standing. (He served as a county judge before his relatively short Senate career.) But for all the contemporary accolades for Truman, this commoner suffered some of the lowest popularity ratings in presidential history. With the exception of a few months following the end of World War II, Truman's approval ratings were often well below 40%. Indeed, these low numbers characterize over half his time in office (American Presidency Project, 2008).

The myth of a common president is strong, but in truth, the commoner may find it nearly impossible to get into the White House. According to the Federal Election Commission, the 2004 presidential candidates spent over \$463 million in their bid for election (CNN.com, 2005). Further, 2004 "candidates, political parties and independent groups spent at least \$1.6 billion on TV ads ... more than double the previous record of \$771 million set in 2000" (Memmott and Drinkard, 2004).

*Conventional Wisdom Tells Us ... Americans Yearn for that  
Honest Politician*

Honesty is the best policy, right? That was the idea behind John McCain's "straight talk express." It was the driving force for Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential campaign when he told voters, "I'll never lie to you." Prohibitions against lying are some of the earliest norms to which individuals are socialized. In politics, the idea of honesty is part of the central lore. George Washington's cherry tree confession and the image of "honest Abe" are iconic elements of our political culture.

Folklore aside, is the honest politician really what voters want? Well ... sometimes. It is true that blatant lies are not well received. "I did not have sex with that woman," or "I am not a crook" did not play well with most U.S. voters, but neither does the cold, hard truth. In 1988, during a primary debate, presidential candidate Bruce Babbitt declared a need for higher taxes. Shortly after that truth-telling session, Babbitt was out of the running. (Apparently, Walter Mondale's 1984 loss, fueled in large measure by a similar "promise," left Babbitt unimpressed and ready to try that "honesty thing" again.) John McCain also suffered dearly at the polls when he told 2008 primary voters that their manufacturing jobs "were never coming back" to Michigan. McCain's straight talk was just what opponent Mitt Romney needed to carry the state. The "American Values Survey" (conducted by the Center for American Values) tells us that the "honest, integrity, and responsibility of the candidate" is the single most

important issue for voters, but while that quality topped voters' list of concerns, it was endorsed by only 39% of those surveyed—hardly a majority position (Jones and Cox, 2006).

The conventional wisdom regarding the virtue of honesty is strong. Yet almost as early as we learn prohibitions against lying, we also learn how to rationalize the telling of lies. We learn that “little white lies” are not as serious as “real lies.” We learn that context matters: lying to strangers is not as serious as lying to friends; lying to peers is more excusable than lying to parents or authorities. We learn that lies told under duress are not as awful as premeditated or “barefaced lies” (Bussey, 1999; Ekman, 2002; Lee, 2004; Schein, 2004). Thus, despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, lying represents a ubiquitous social practice. Children lie to parents, and parents lie to grandparents. Employees lie to employers, and employers lie to regulators. Presidents lie to Congress, and Congress lies to the people. And, of course, candidates regularly lie to voters.

What explains the prevalence of lies when conventional wisdom so strongly supports honesty? Cultural values can be powerful motivators that drive lying practices. Thus U.S. voters are likely to tolerate—even welcome a lie if it supports their hopes and goals. For example, the current desire for universal health care has voters “buying in” to the candidates’ plans on the issue—even as independent evaluators tell us that *no* candidate’s plan is viable (Knowledge@Wharton, 2007). Similarly, with 2008’s record high gas prices and the threat they present to economic stability, many voters embraced some candidates’ promises for tax holidays and offshore drilling plans. Of course, we now know that the tax holiday would have meant little to those at the pumps, and the fruits of offshore drilling will take years to recognize (Doggett, 2008). Finally, note that Americans’ value of conventionality<sup>5</sup> had many voters all too willing to believe blatant lies about unconventional candidate Barack Obama. Accusations suggesting Obama was really a Muslim, a black extremist, and just plain anti-American resonated with a surprising number of voters.

Candidates might well be willing to stretch the truth or engage in hyperbole in the name of central values. Voters may be willing to forgive that hyperbole in pursuit of the same. We do what we must to achieve what is worthy or desirable. Thus in politics, lies are what we might call “normal lies”—socially acceptable practices linked to productive social outcomes (Ruane and Cerulo, 2008; Ruane *et al.*, 1995). Voters say they long for straight talk; candidates say they long to give it. But in truth,

<sup>5</sup> Conventionality is yet another of the top 10 middle-class norms identified by Tittle and Paternoster. It ranks Number 4 on their top-10 list.

both voters and candidates rationalize and legitimate normal lies as a means to a noble end: getting the “best” candidate elected, assuring the good of one’s country.

*Conventional Wisdom Tells Us ... Voters Hate When Campaigns Go Negative*

We’ve heard many a candidate say “the voters want us to talk about the issues,” and candidates assure reporters that “the American people are smart and will reject smear tactics.” However, a good deal of research shows that voters are far from immune to negative ads. Indeed, under certain conditions, negative ads can be the best tool of a winning campaign (see, e.g., Cerulo, 1995; Franz *et al.*, 2007; Jamieson, 2000; Wattenberg and Briens, 1999).

In general, voters do not respond well to personal attacks on a candidate. Calling one’s opponent inept, corrupt, too rich, too old, too sick, or too ugly does not seem to sway many voters (Jamieson, 2000), but voters view ads that attack a candidate on positions (sometimes referred to as “contrast ads”) as educational and informative. These contrast ads tend to help the candidate using them. Unfortunately, this positive effect holds true even when the information being transmitted is false. We can all remember some of the classic cases in this regard. LBJ’s “Daisy ad” convinced U.S. voters that Goldwater was a dangerous warmonger. Bush’s “Willy Horton ad” convinced voters that Dukakis was soft on crime. The Bush “Swift Boat ads” effectively painted John Kerry as dishonest and disingenuous.

Negative ads appear especially effective in close, hotly contested campaigns. Some credit the negative ad’s ability to generate emotion as a source of its power. Further, media “replays” of negative ads contribute to their effectiveness, especially if those replays occur on respected news venues. In essence, attack ads acquire legitimacy when commented on by a respected news figure (Jasperson and Fan, 2004; Winneg *et al.*, 2005).

We said that negative ads work positively for those who run them; but negative ads may also hold positive social effects—they have been credited by some with increasing voter turnout. Political scientist Kenneth Goldman contends that increased exposure to negative advertising makes voters feel more engaged, better informed, and thus more likely to vote. So if large voter turnout makes for a stronger democracy, negative ads may be providing the body politic with an invaluable service.



## CONCLUSION

Here, we reviewed just a few of the conventional wisdoms that permeated the 2008 campaign. Clearly, there are several more deserving some serious second thoughts. The one thing we can be sure of is that conventional wisdoms will continue to be a part of politics' stock of knowledge. Candidates, analysts, and voters will continue to embrace them. In short, conventional wisdoms represent politics as usual. Perhaps that fact seems harmless. Yet as John F. Kennedy noted:

The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebearers. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought. Myth distracts us everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

The Kennedy quote reminds us that the sociological eye has an important place in political analysis. Indeed, sociology may be the necessary anecdote to the distracting power of myth.

Want to debunk a conventional campaign wisdom ... or comment on this or any article appearing in "The Forum"? Send your response (500 words maximum) to [cerulo@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:cerulo@rci.rutgers.edu).

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