

CAMPAIGN-FUL LESSONS FOR YOUNG VOTERS And What We Can Do to Offset Them

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The uncivil wars being waged by political candidates are dangerous to the psychological, emotional, moral, and democratic development and well being of our nation's children and youth. As a lifelong educator, parenting consultant, parent and grandparent, I am extremely concerned about lessons that impressionable youth are learning from candidates and pundits alike. Our Nation's voting propensities – the cornerstone of our democratic process – may be forever stunted.

Typical campaign behavior and the worst schoolyard behavior have become virtually indistinguishable: “But *he* started it...;” “No, I *won't* apologize...;” “*He's* lying...;” “No, *he's* lying;” can be heard from candidates as well as kids in campaign rallies and playgrounds across America. This is the kind of behavior that usually triggers the adult admonition: “Grow up!” Yet political trash talking abounds and is likely to intensify as the days dwindle to the November 2nd showdown.

With \$40 million spent on political advertising between October 7th and 17th, \$400 million spent on political ads to-date, and \$500 million projected by Election Day, it is all but impossible for any of us to escape the increasingly mean-spirited, malicious, and sarcastic portrayal of the candidates seeking to lead us. There is virtually no respite from assaultive politics. As the bi-annual campaigns meld together into what feels like one never ending campaign, there is little time to regain our civil equilibrium.

To children – and to many adults – it seems as if our choice is to vote for the *least bad* candidate, because there is not a *best* one. If one listens to the propaganda spewing from the candidates and their handlers, it is easy to feel that our choice has been limited to which dishonest scoundrel to elect. This is hardly an incentive to vote, and helps explain why turnout of our youngest voters is chronically and pathetically anemic.

Sports and military terminology are the vocabulary of choice to describe the presidential *sweepstakes* as they enter the *homestretch*. A win-lose mentality discourages us from weighing the issues. Reporters tell us that the candidates have *taken the gloves off* in the *open battle* for the White House. Every manner of commentator refers to *battleground states*. An October 18, *TIME* magazine article even combines sports and military analogies:

“A race that many Republicans privately hoped might be wrapped up by now has come down to hand-to-hand combat, fought not just by two bare knuckle candidates but also by thousands upon thousands of soldiers in the trenches, signing up every last voter, knocking on doors, drilling through data bases and aiming for November 2nd, when whoever has the stronger ground game wins.”

We need to stop deluding ourselves that once an election is over, the accusations and name-calling will be forgotten. Although specific allegations may be forgotten, the overall impact of assaultive politics on acutely impressionable minds – and developed minds as well – is insidiously corrosive. With both candidates thoroughly impugned, the newly elected President will needlessly have to waste time trying to regain respect. Wouldn't that time be better spent concentrating on the important work of the electorate? At the very least, the damage caused by these pernicious campaigns leads to cynicism that affects character development and reflects poorly on our democratic process and moral stature throughout the world.

Here are four simple things we all can do to restore our civil senses and to encourage a new generation of voters:

- Acknowledge and validate youngsters' perceptions that the negative rhetoric from the candidates has been undignified, inappropriate, hurtful, and even occasionally dishonest – especially when displayed by adults seeking to represent and lead our country.
- Encourage discussion about the meaning of “public service” and the specific qualities required for humane leadership. Identify individuals, including peers, teachers, and others in our daily lives, who possess those qualities.
- List specific behaviors and actions each of us can take to demonstrate respect for others, even if we do not agree with all their views and ideas.
- Be mindful of and vigilant about our own behaviors around children as our passions intensify during the remaining days of this election season.

To bring some dignity back to our democratic process, perhaps we should allow the innate optimism and fairness traditionally associated with childhood to influence our attitudes and behaviors as we gear up for the next round of elections. Then, maybe we will feel more confident about holding ourselves up before the world as a moral and democratic beacon for others to follow. We also will be able to better “get out the vote” and honor the founding ideals of our nation.
