Comparing Children’s Views of the ’04 and ’08 Presidential Elections

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The immediate goal of our research is to compare late grade school children’s understanding of the issues that influenced voters in the 08 presidential elections with their age cohort’s understanding of the ’04 presidential elections (Pufall, Bean & Goshe, 2005). Three general findings emerged from the ’04 election. One, they demonstrated an asymmetric understanding of the reasons adult voters supported or opposed a candidate. This asymmetry appears to be anchored in their opinions about the candidates. They were more likely to find issues justifying adults voting for the candidate the children supported than justification for supporting the candidate they opposed. Conversely, children were more likely to find issues to justify not voting for the candidate the children opposed than for voting against the one they supported. Two, children were more likely to justify voters’ choices in terms of characteristics or political positions than in term of the disposition of the voters. For example, they described their understanding of each candidate’s position on marriage between homosexuals more frequently than described the voter’s personal and religious opposition to homosexuals marrying or being biased against homosexual. Three, although character issues did not dominate their reasoning about the candidates, the children focused on issues of trust and competence when the candidate’s character was mentioned.

Procedure: Children were group tested. Approximately ten children filled out the questionnaire at a time. Experimenters were present to answer the questions about the questionnaire. Few questions were asked.

Questionnaire: Basically, we used the same 14 item questionnaire answered by the children following the ’04 election. Our analysis focuses on the seven questions that ask children to identify justifications voters’ used to support or oppose a candidate.

Children correctly filled in the blanks for the question about what the people voted for him?  Pro Obama: Why do you think _____ was elected, that is, why do you think the majority of the people voted for him?  Anti Obama: Some did not vote for _____, why do you think they did not vote for him?  Anti McCain: Why do you think the other candidate was not elected; that is, why do you think so many people did not vote for him?  Pro McCain: Of course, some people voted for _____, why do you think they voted for him?  Question 9: If you could have voted, for whom would you have voted?  Pro Obama Child: Please tell me why you would have voted for him.  Anti McCain Child: Please tell me why you would not vote for the other candidate? (This question was not included in the ’04 study.)

Reliability
Three judges independently coded the answers. The criteria for agreement was two out of three or all three judges coding the answers in the same way. Agreement varied with the grade level of the children; there was 80 and 70 percent agreement for the older and younger children respectively.

Results
The results are cast as the percentage of children who included at least one example of a justification in their answer. In some cases children offered several examples, e.g., children often identified several issues when explaining adults’ or their own votes, however, the percentages do not reflect that effect. Figures 1 through 4 report more conservative findings in representing the percentage of the 20 fourth and 20 sixth grade children who at least mention a justification.

Guiding questions
Is the asymmetry observed in the children’s reasoning in the ’04 Presidential elections replicated in their reasoning about the ’08 Presidential elections?  Do children justify voter’s choice based on the a candidate’s character and positions or their own concerns?  Did a specific aspect of character dominate the ’08 Presidential elections as trust did in the ’04 elections?

Methods
Participants: Parents permitted us to give a questionnaire to 20 fourth and sixth grade children. There were more girls (13 and 15) than boys at each grade level. We tested 4th- rather than 3rd-grade children, as we had in ’04 because almost half of the children in the 3rd grade did not appear to understand the questions. The children in the ’08 study attended the same private day school as the children from the ’04 study. Their parents generally are college educated and employed professionally. The school is located in a “Blue State”. In ’04 all but two of the children said they would have voted for Kerry. This year, all of the children said they would have voted for Obama.

Coping Systems
Candidate based justifications
Presidential: “He would make a good president.” “He is inspiring.” “He has experience.”

Personal Characteristics: “He is smart,” “He cannot be trusted.” “He is African American.”

Direction: “We need change and he would change America.” “He would continue to do what Bush is doing.”

Political issues: “He would continue the war in Iraq,” “He would bring our troops home.” “He would lower the taxes of the rich.”

Candidates’ Political Affiliation: “He is a Republican.”

Voter based justifications
Identification with the Candidate: “They like him.” “I think he is inspiring.”

Personal issues: “They are racist.” “They want to be taxed less.”

Voters’ Political Affiliation: “They are Republican.”

Conclusions
Children’s understanding of political campaigns and voters’ justification of their political choices reflects ways of thinking about in- and out-groups. In Western society, we tend to think asymmetrical about in- and out-groups, recognizing only good in the in-group and only bad in the out-group. Our findings suggest that this form of social cognition appears as early as fourth grade.

For these children from a politically Blue family and community heritage, politics is a serious aspect of society, and, asgoogle not elected, religion an important aspect of identity.

Next we will be analyzing the specific issues. For example, we will more precisely document children’s thoughts about race as well as political and social issues that children thought were critical to this election. As well, we will compare children with their parents both to determine how the children and parents participate in asymmetrical reasoning as well as to determine whether the issues central to the children’s understanding about the political life of the country are shared by their parents.